Dog Days

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by Mercury_Skye

Summary

After being exonerated and released, Will is trying to put his life back together. He didn't expect that life to include trusting another human being, even if they are Captain America.

Notes

This is written in response to this prompt: http://hannibalkink.dreamwidth.org/2246.html?thread=3310790#cmt3310790
I didn't want to post this in parts, however I have no many other things going on at the moment that it seems unfair to just leave it partially unfinished and unseen on my hard drive. If the ending of this section seems odd, please remember that it was written to be a complete fic, I know it ends on a odd note here but it'll flow on with the next bit. When I have more time I shall continue on with it and then post the rest.
Until then; Please Enjoy.

Chapter 1

Like the best things in Will's life, it had involved dogs.

Maybe he smelt like his dogs at home, or perhaps lost dogs recognized him as a kindred spirit, but all dogs liked him. It was lucky that the feeling was mutual and that most dogs took far less time to warm up to Will than his fellow humans seemed to.

It had been the first time since being released from prison that Will had gone sleepwalking, which was a miracle in itself. He woke on the damp ground, shivering and sniffling as the frosted breeze made his nose run and ears ache. He had sweated through a shirt, and some of the moisture there had crystallized in the dawn air.

It took a moment for him to realize that he was clutching something warm and furry, something that rose and fell at a steady, comforting pace. There was a dense, unpleasant mud smell, but one comfortingly familiar and he didn't want to open his eyes and break the spell of that small, unsure moment.

He assumed that the warm form was Winston, who followed him out as he had done before.

When he released the canine, Will noticed that the fur was much too short to be Winston's fluffy coat. Maybe, he thought, one of his other companions had followed him, but the smell and the feel of the coat didn't awake the memory of any names.

"Oh," he exclaimed, as he pushed himself up onto his elbow and observed the dog that had stretched out beside him. "Hello."

Even through his gaze was fuzzy without his glasses Will was able to recognize that it was not one of his dogs. Its... *Her* belly was white, but mattered with mud from lying on the ground all night, with a brown head and back. She was lying patiently still while Will slowly moved to sit up, snuffling the ground where he had been lying as he gave her a thankful scratch behind her ears.

"Where did you come from?" He reached for her collar, and found an identification number and a name. "Thank you for keeping me warm, Peggy," Will smiled. "I appreciate it."

Will washed Peggy off and placed her in the large cage outside with the other dogs, so they could sniff and get used to her presence before they became friends. He knew more than anyone that social acceptance was difficult, and making friends was harder, so he tried to make the process as easy as possible for everyone.

Peggy, for her part, seemed happy enough in her cage as long as the other dogs were hanging around, sniffing around the edges of her confines, and sticking her nose through the bars to try and be closer to the others.

Carefully watching over them, Will smiled. She would be a wonderful addition to the family; she was patient, not overly affectionate but incredibly caring and friendly. A quick look in a dog-breed book confirmed his suspicion that she was an English Foxhound.

He would have to start leaving the dog-door open when he was at work, so he wouldn't have to worry about such an energetic breed being cooped up in the house. She should be happy with the amount of land he owned.

"*Fairfax County Animal Shelter*, *how may I help you*?"

"Hi Caroline."

"*Will! How have you been? How's Winston?*"

He felt a smile tug at his face as he looked over at the golden dog, who was moving cautiously on his stomach towards the newcomer. "I've been good, and Winston is doing great. He mourned for a while, but he's in good shape."

"*That's good, I was so worried about him, but don't tell me you found another one already.*"

"I'm afraid so. Her tag says her name is Peggy." He rattled off her id number.

There was the clacking of keys, "*I'll chase it up and get back to you first thing tomorrow."*

"Thanks Caroline."

"*No problem. You... You look after yourself, okay, Will?*"

"I-I'll... Talk to you later."

Will hung up the phone quickly before he sighed and ran a hand over his face as his other held the phone limo. He and Caroline had never met in person, their only interaction being phone calls about lost dogs, her researching any identification and him looking after the canines until their owners were found.

Or not found.

Still, somehow, she had found out about him and his time in prison. It didn't seem to matter to most that he was innocent, just that he was crazy enough that people believed him guilty of the grotesque crimes.

"Peggy?" Will inquired, reaching out a hand towards the cage. The dog turned at the sound of her name, and reached out to lick the hand offered. "Looks like you'll be staying here overnight, girl."

Will felt bad that he couldn't keep Peggy in the bedroom with them all, but if there was the possibility she wouldn't be staying then he didn't want the other dogs to get overly attached.

When he'd woken up in a sweat, not an unusual occurrence, he ventured from his bedroom and down the hall. He was glad that the episode of sleepwalking was, for now, an anomaly and he could be awake for the journey.

The inner doors of his house were kept open, so that the dogs could wander freely. He trusted them, but for the night had closed off his lounge, the foxhound carefully contained within.

He poked his head around the door, just wanting to check on her, make sure she was having a better night than he was before he went back to bed.

She was lying on a collection of pillows and blankets, and Will gave a small smile as he wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. She looked comfortable and raised her head, whining a little at him in concern. He felt a stab of disapproval at her owner for letting such a lovely girl out of their sight, then felt guilty because they could have been sick, or elderly or dead, and he shouldn't judge.

Not yet, anyway.

Will smiled slightly and closed the door, knowing that the sweat clinging to his t-shirt probably smelt like distress, and wouldn't help the new dog feel like this was a safe place.

Safe. Like a home should feel.

"*Hi Will, it's Caroline. I guess you're at work, or something. Peggy's address is in New York, but I called her owner and he's in the city for business that's why she's here. I didn't want to give him your number without your permission, but he said I can give you his so just call him whenever your home, okay?*"

The day had gone like most since he had been released. He was restricted to teaching, the facility forcing him to use old, solved cases as his lecture material and not being allowed near anything new or thought-provoking.

The class seemed to be silently judging him.

Although they were always quiet, as Will didn't like much socializing with or among his students during lectures, there was an extra level of potency. They were applying everything Will had taught them to their lecturer, and Will didn't want to know what conclusions they were making about his mental state.

To cleanse himself of the day, Will had taken the dogs for a walk as soon as he arrived home. It was a routine he used to do in the morning, but since he had returned to work and his problem with sleeping had gotten worse, he was not aware enough when he got out of bed to

go for a morning jog. The immediate tending to his dogs as soon as he returned had become a helpful focus to turn his mind away from the world beyond Wolf Trap.

He didn't tend to have an appetite when he was working, but when he got home he failed to grab an apple or protein bar before leashing up the dogs. He was excited to take Peggy out with the others. We hadn't wanted to put them all together unsupervised, so she'd spent the day isolated from them, but being a part of the group walk would help her bond, should she be staying.

Seven dogs in two hands didn't leave much room for them to spread out, and while the others were used to being cosy, Peggy had kept trying to veer away from the pack.

On the way back, she calmed down.

When he arrived home, sweating in a way that didn't quite remind him of restless nights, he looked through his cupboards for a collection of packet foods he could combine for his dinner and checked the messages on his answering-machine.

He paused at the feminine voice that had left a message, who talked about Peggy's owner.

Will rethought his dinner plans, and went for a bottle of whisky instead.

"*Hello*?"

"I-Is this Steven Rogers?"

"*Please call me 'Steve'. Who's this*?"

"I'm Will Graham, I have your dog Peggy. The animal shelter gave me your number, they said that was okay."

"*I did. She disappeared a few days ago and I've been so worried, thank you for looking after her. The girl at the centre said you look after a lot of dogs who don't have a home. I hope they didn't have any problems with Peg*."

"No, not at all. They're used to strange dogs, and she's been perfect."

"*Great. She said you were in Wolf Trap, right?*"

"Yeah."

"*I have no idea how she got so far away from me... She must have been so scared*."

"Well, I have her now and she's fine. Are you... Err.... D-do you want to come pick her up? I know you're here for business, and if you're too busy I don't mind looking after her for a while."

A sigh; "*Clearly she wasn't happy with where we're staying... Are you sure you wouldn't mind? I'll pay you for it; I don't want you to be out of pocket buying food for her or anything*."

"That's not really necessary."

"*Well, we should meet first. I know you've already had Peg for a night, but I'd feel better if I got to know you a little before she stays with you.*"

"Oh.... Umm... I-I suppose I can understand that. I... yeah, s-sure."

Will kept the beanie over his head and pulled down over his ears to protect it from the autumn wind. He had brought Peggy, Winston and Bailey with him, as he knew Steve would probably want to see her again if he'd been as worried as he sounded on the phone. Winston and Bailey were the ones who seemed the closest to Peggy and Will hoped that seeing the three of them happily playing together might help Steve feel safer letting her stay with Will.

It was fairly quiet at the dog-park, not many people were willing to sit in such cold weather and just watch their dogs. Most sane people would be jogging alongside them, keeping warm themselves.

He didn't know how long he'd waited before a hand on his shoulder startled him.

Will automatically flinched away from the contact. He had been staring at the dogs, trying to focus on their movements and joy, forcing his mind not to wander into any other territory.

"Hi. Sorry to startle you."

The FBI consultant glanced at bright blue eyes before his gaze darted away. It landed on a strong jaw, then board chest, and settled on a clump of trees just beyond the other's form.

"No. It's fine." He frowned. "Are you Steve Rogers?"

"I am. You must be Mr. Graham."

Will blinked at the extended hand for a moment and cleared his throat. "Y-yes. It's Will, but yes." He stammered as wiped his hands on his pants before accepting the hand-shake.

Steve's hand was warm, despite the cold day, and firm. It felt like a grip from a corny movie with someone being heaved up and off a cliff. It felt like a grip that could never let go.

Will withdrew his hand quickly, conscious of how sweaty it must have felt, and turned away and back to the dogs.

"That's Bailey. That's Winston."

The three appeared to be playing a form of tag, or relay race. He heard a soft laugh behind him from Steve.

“She looks happy.” He moved into the side of Will’s vision. “Peg doesn’t get to play with other dogs much. My housemates love her and she’s never alone, but I don’t get out to parks very often. She’s more of a people dog.”

“My dogs are used to welcoming strangers; I’ve never had any territorial or alpha issues with any of them. Everyone’s getting on really well with Peggy. She’s a good dog.”

“How many dogs do you have?”

Will swallowed down n ‘eight’ before it could be spoken. He’d only had Peggy for a night. “I have seven. All different breeds. I guess I have a tendency to pick up strays.”

“Do you live alone?”

“I have all the company I need.” Will stated, feeling a bit defensive about the question. He was better of by himself, he’d always thought that. After a quick moment he remembered that the man was most likely just worried about leaving his dog in Wills company. “I look after the dogs by myself, but they are *well* looked after. I just... I don’t have much of a social life, so when I’m not at work I’m with them.”

Will glanced at Steve, crossing his arms against the cold and third degree. “So, why did you take her on a business trip? Couldn’t your housemates have looked after her?”

He looked up at Steve’s face, seeing something defensive but not entirely hurt in his eyes before Will shied away from the bigger man’s emotion.

It was clear to Will that Steve really cared for Peggy, and already felt guilty enough that she had run from him. He could understand why Steve would want her close; if he had only one dog he might do the same when he travelled interstate for crime scenes Then again, he had let her run.

He almost chuckled. For all his empathy, he couldn’t feel sorry for Steve. He felt too much for Peggy to offer him any forgiveness just yet.

“I didn’t think she’d have such a problem with it.” Steve explained, clearly sensing the hostility in Will. “We’re staying on a military base, and I guess all the people were just too much for her. I’m a little over protective and she’s been sheltered, but she’s strong.”

“She is.” Will agreed softly, as he watched her jump over the much smaller Bailey.

Occasionally, she would glance over at the two humans, keeping them in her sight as she played. It was clear that Peggy knew that Steve was standing close-by, but didn’t want to come over until he gave his permission. It was a sign of good training, and Will felt a little bubble of approval for the dog owner standing beside him.

Peggy’s good and gentle nature, her cautious care, was a reflection of her owner.

Will looked up so he could study Steve properly while the taller man looked out at the dogs, unaware of the special-agent's eyes on him. He had a strong face, one that seemed to reflect a great strength from within. He held himself with confidence, but not arrogance, and with a shade of self-doubt in his eyes. And pain, Will was loath to find, in the lines between his eyebrows.

"Do you think she's upset with me?"

Will huffed a laugh. "Maybe she thinks you're upset with her." He found himself giving the other a genuine smile, something that felt odd and hysterical on his face, even though it was a normal, regular expression on most. "Why don't you call her over and see?"

Steve looked over at Will's smile and gave a shy one of his own before looking back out to Peggy.

He whistled, and Peggy dropped everything she was doing and bolted towards the blond man.

Although she was a decent sized dog, when she launched herself at her owner, Steve was able to hold her to his chest as if she was a third the size.

His smile was like looking at the sun, too bright, and Will had to look away, down to the arms of the soft leather jacket holding Peggy.

It wasn't until he felt a wet lap at his face that the special-agent looked back up. Peggy was leaning over from Steve's arms to taste his face, and Will could see the gleeful expression on the other man's face beyond the canine snout.

"She seems to like you."

Will was thrilled that Steve had allowed Peggy to stay with him. The downside being that the man Will assumed was a soldier wanted to check in every now and again, which was a level of casual social interaction that he was not familiar or comfortable with.

But Will couldn't deny the man access to his dog, so an arrangement was made.

Steve had agreed to drive out to Will's house after the teacher finished work, to walk Peggy while Will walked the seven others dogs. Whether they would walk together remained to be seen, but the ex-agent hoped that they would not. He needed that time to be away from people, to not think about people and the horrors that they could create.

He didn't mention Steve or his temporary charge to anyone at work. He knew it was not important enough to hide, but the thought of his two worlds mixing made him feel nauseated. Will's dogs were his salvation and, throughout the day, Will had begun to realize that Steve, even though they had only had a brief meeting, had become an extension of that.

Also, it was nice having secrets that didn't pertain to murder or hallucinations. Or both.

Not that he had much contact with people lately. Occasionally Jack would poke his head into his class, or Hannibal would call to check up on him. Will had made it very clear that intervention from either of them was unwelcome. He didn't trust Jack anymore, and Hannibal... Well, Will didn't know what to think about Hannibal. He knew something had happened between them, something that sent off Will's warning signals, ones that told him not to make eye contact, not to trust and not to talk, but he couldn't remember the days which surrounded his capture.

The only person he really allowed to talk to him was Alana, but those conversations were stilted and awkward. He wasn't sure what was happening between them, all he knew was that there was something, but she was hot and cold, and, generally, that just meant Will was always left felt empty.

Part of Will suspected that she thought all his brokenness would be cured along with his brain; that he would just have to trust her again, and he would be... unbroken enough for her.

He knew on some level she didn't believe it. *She* probably knew she didn't believe it, but he didn't like disappointing her.

Steve didn't want anything from Will other than a place for his dog to stay. It was something he could easily provide, but even if he couldn't, he didn't think it would be disappointing Steve in any manner.

Steve was someone who didn't know him. Maybe he could sense something off about Will, as the profiler didn't know how anyone couldn't, but he didn't know the extent of Will's problems, or look at him like he was about to snap.

Yet, it made Will nervous, as he didn't know anything about the man he was going to spend the afternoon with. Steve seemed simple, uncomplicated, and the more Will thought about him the more he started looking forward to getting to know the blond.

When he got home, Will had a moment of panic standing in his lounge. There was dog hair everywhere, and the usual dog smell which he didn't really notice anymore but knew was there. He had an hour before Steve would arrive, and he opened all his doors and windows to let the brisk air inside before he made a desperate grab for the vacuum cleaner.

He was washing glasses, making sure there was enough for another person to re-hydrate after walking the dogs, when a knock on the door startled him.

"Steve," he managed to greet the man in the doorframe

The blond looked even more intimidating in loose pants and a white t-shirt. It appeared that the leather jacket Steve had been wearing the day before had done nothing to reveal his physique.

Will realized that the arrangement may be a bad idea. In addition to not knowing anything about Steve, the man clearly had a level of strength that meant Will wouldn't be able to stand

a chance against him. He felt his palms sweating and took an instinctual step back into the house.

“I-I’ll just get the dogs.”

They will protect him, Will thought.

Then he looked down at Peggy, who was sitting at the screen door, pawing at it to get through to her owner outside, who had crouched down to talk to her through the screen, as Will hadn’t invited him in. It was a small gesture that calmed Will down, somewhat, and knowing that Peggy trusted her owner so much could only say good things.

“You can come in while I round them up.” He decided, “It might take a few moments. Do you want any water? There’re glasses in the kitchen.”

Will looked away from the blinding smile.

“Thanks.”

It didn’t take too long to round up the dogs, their routine had been upset by not going out as soon as Will had gotten home, and the vacuum sound always made Trix a little twitchy, but they knew what was happening as soon as they saw the leads.

Steve was by the kitchen bench, glass clasped in his hands, staring out the window as a memory shadowed his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Will asked, seeing pain flicker over the other man’s face and knowing the answer.

He smiled sheepishly, “Sorry.”

Will nodded, but was glad that the other man hadn’t claimed to be okay when clearly there was something going on behind his expressive blue expression.

“We could do this tomorrow if you’ve had a long day or...” he trailed off, trying to keep the hope out of his voice. It wasn’t that he didn’t like what he’d seen so far of Steve, but he didn’t feel quite ready.

“No, I’ll be fine. Sorry.”

Tilting his head, Will ran his eyes over the strong posture. “Where were you stationed?”

Steve blinked. “Pardon?”

“You’re a soldier, you’re staying at a military base,” he offered as an explanation, “You’ve just come back from a tour somewhere. I can see it. I was just wondering where, but you don’t have to talk about it.”

Will cursed himself. He shouldn’t have asked; he wouldn’t have wanted anyone to ask if it’d been him. And he *definitely* wouldn’t have wanted Steve to ask about his being in prison.

“I’m just surprised,” Steve cut through Will’s moment. “I had assumed you knew,” He gave a self deprecating laugh and avoided Will’s gaze for a moment. He rubbed the back of his neck, seeming to shrink in on himself. “I’m too used to people knowing who I am. I shouldn’t be.”

Frowning, Will shrugged. “Should I know who you are?”

“No, sorry. You have no reason too and I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I-I don’t watch a lot of T.V, or anything like that.” He glanced around the kitchen. “I think I have one in the back room. Don’t know if it works.”

Steve chuckled. “That’s fine... Kinda nice, if I’m being honest. It means I can be myself.”

“You can be yourself by keeping secrets?”

Shrugging, Steve met Will’s eyes, who held them. “It’s just not who I am...” he frowned, shook his head and looked down at the ground for a moment, “but it’s everything I am, sometimes, and that’s all people see when they look at me.”

“If it helps, I usually see things that other people don’t.” He crossed his arms over his middle, chewing his lip for a moment before deciding to add, quietly, “I’ve had a lot of people keeping secrets from me, I don’t need another one.”

He saw Steve shift to something more curious, but respective of Will’s privacy. It made Will immediately doubt bringing up the point; if Steve was so willing to allow privacy for Will’s dirty laundry, then he had no right to demand Steve tell him anything.

If anyone could understand how pre-conceived notions could affect perception, Will could. He’d spent six and a half months in gaol because of it.

He opened his mouth to apologise, but Steve raised a hand.

“No.” He cut across Will, his voice gentle but leaving no room for argument, “It’s not fair to think you’ll be the same as everyone else.” He put the glass down on the bench before. “I was surprised that you didn’t know me because I’m Captain America.”

Will blinked, “Oh... Oh, wow.” He took a step forward. It fit, really, and Will felt embarrassed for not recognizing him sooner. It made sense. It was clear the man had a lot of internal strength, but not a lot on confidence in it, which fit with what he knew about the Captain.

“Well, that explains why I didn’t recognize you.” He smiled up at the soldier in self-deprecation. “I could never afford the trading cards or comics growing up, but I’d heard you were... back.”

He averted his gaze down and saw that one of the dogs who had wandered in, leash trailing behind and wondering why they hadn’t left yet.

Although it was true that Will could never afford any of the Captain America merchandise, the story had been important to Will growing up, as it had been for many kids who helped

work on the docks.

They hadn't been interested in the tales of war glory and heroics. Will's favourite had been the story of a sickly boy, growing up poor and beaten down, who a good heart who lived a clean life and was chosen from the entire body of soldiers because of it. It had given so many of them hope, when they could see so many more privileged people succeed, that if they respected others and worked hard, someone would see that and they might catch a break.

Will had never been that naive, but it had been the first notion of many that'd made him believe he could one day join the police academy.

It seemed so long ago.

"I might leave." Steve's voice cut through an awkward silence that Will hadn't noticed, "Maybe we can do this on another day."

"No." Will took a step towards the other man. He stopped and realized that he had his arm outstretched, ready to stop, to touch, the other man. He looked at it for a moment before letting it fall to his side. "I-It was just a surprise. You don't have to leave, you came all the way here and I know you don't want to disappoint Peggy. I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable."

He meant it, too. He made a lot of people uncomfortable, but had long gotten over feeling guilty about it.

Steve was different. He didn't want Steve to be uncomfortable around him.

"No, I'm sorry. I should have told you straight away and not sprung it on you like this."

Kid gloves, Will thought. He was getting enough of that from Alana, and to a lesser extent, Jack, so he didn't need it from someone else too.

He turned away from Steve, not wanting the taller man to see the discomfort on his face, and whistled for the dogs, who bounded in with their leads getting tangled in the other's legs and tails whipping each other.

"It's fine. But if we're going to walk the dogs we should head out now, before it gets too dark."

Their walk had been made in silence. Will hadn't minded so much, as it had been surprisingly comfortable despite the embarrassment that had preceded it. In the beginning Steve would ask permission to sprint forward for a while, but after several times, Steve didn't bother asking permission. He would dash ahead, turning into a small silhouette against the setting sun, but would always return back to Will's side, smiling and not even out of breath.

When they had returned to the house it was dark. Steve had thanked the much smaller man for his company, bid goodbyes to not only Peggy, but the whole canine troupe as well, and

left on the back of a vintage motorcycle.

It was a bit strange to be casually walking next to Captain America, but in doing so, Will had found himself calming down about needing to be social with a national treasure.

Steve did a very good job of just being Steve, and Will sensed how uncomfortable he'd been when telling the ex-agent about who he was. It was clear he had been nervous that Will would treat him differently, but, perhaps, Will was so awkward around everyone, that there had been very little change after the revelation. Steve seemed to be just as carefully friendly towards the other man as he had been before.

Will had lay in bed and thought about the other man before going to sleep. There were so many questions that he'd wanted to ask, but didn't think were appropriate. Nothing particularly personal, but Steve was in such a unique situation, that there were parts that Will, even with all his profiling experience, couldn't fathom.

He had fallen asleep and into dreams of battlefields; the deaths of everyone he knew. Somehow, the quiet unseen deaths that he dreamt of, the waking up after decades and finding everyone gone, was somehow worse than the usual visions of corpses.

At least the corpses kept him company. Without them he felt alone.

The day after his first walk with Steve, Will had gone to approach Jack. It was the first time he had approached the head of behavioural sciences since he had been released. Normally the experienced agent came to the classroom to check in, maybe test the waters, so he seemed rightfully surprised when Will appeared at his doorway voluntarily.

"I want to help. A-Again. I'm not doing anything in that classroom, Jack. I feel... impotent. Safe but impotent. I have this... *thing*, and it scares the hell out of me sometimes, but it helps people."

Jack leant forward in his chair, resting his hands on his desk. "I'm not sure we should go down that road again."

"I was sick, Jack" Will says sharply, much sharper than he had intended. It's a valid point, he feels, although he knows they're both aware of the fuller story.

Still, he felt satisfied to see Jack flinch a little, as minute as it was.

"Will, I don't think it's a good idea."

He opened his mouth to argue, but Jack help up a hand.

"Maybe," he continued, stifling what Will was going to say, "we can ease you back into it," the hand turned into a pointing finger, "but nothing too stimulating. The second it gets too much you stop. You *tell me*, and you stop."

Kid gloves and baby steps.

"I will. As long as you let me stop."

“As long as you stop if I tell you to stop.”

“...Okay.”

Jack leant back in his chair, “I also want an assessment by Doctor Lecter first.”

Something in Will recoiled.

He didn’t know why.

Somehow Will was able to put off the appointment with Hannibal for a day. He claimed to be busy with his dogs and lesson planning, even though the doctor had been willing to rearrange his schedule to accommodate him as soon as the call had been made.

He had known for a long time that he would have to, at some point, sit down with Doctor Lecter again. The man was not one to be ignored, and he had attempted several times to try and rebuild whatever friendship they’d once had; offers to drop-by with food or visit his classes, but never showing up in person. Will hadn’t indulged him with much conversation, just reassured him that he was uncomfortable around everyone since he had returned and that it wasn’t personal.

Without a doubt, the only reason why Hannibal believed the excuse was because Alana would have confirmed it. He’d been distant with everyone; there was no reason why Hannibal should feel singled out. Indeed, even Will didn’t know why he felt a particular pull to stay away from the European.

“Hi. Steve?”

“*It’s me. How are you?*”

“I’m... I’m okay, but I was just wondering if you had time to come around and walk Peggy tomorrow.”

“*That’d be great. I could use the break*.”

Will huffed a slightly bitter laugh, “I could use the company.”

After an hour in Doctor Lecter’s office, Will could tell that Hannibal was disappointed in him. There wasn’t any frustration, but that had been expected as Hannibal was an infinitely patient man, although it was clear that the interview hadn’t gone how the doctor had wanted.

Still, there had been some relief in the psychiatrist’s air. Maybe because Will was clearly healed from his encephalitis, no hallucinations or lost time, and perhaps something else, something that Will could read in the other man’s strange eyes but not decipher.

Will had briefly mentioned the nightmares he had been having, but refused to talk about their content, something he had never done with the doctor before. It was clear that Hannibal felt guilty about not being able to rescue him from his incarceration for almost seven months, and Will did not want to make that worse by describing the images his mistrust and hurt conjured in the night.

Hannibal had not agreed to sign Will's form after the one session. He stated that they would need several to properly assess Will's ability to return to work.

Part of Will suspected that it was a power play. It couldn't have been because of his growing refusal to open up and speak candidly, because Hannibal must have suspected that maybe the case in the beginning, yet had failed to rubber-stamp the form as he had previously done.

Maybe Hannibal just felt he should be cautious, lest pervious events repeat themselves.

Will couldn't blame him, but he did resent the need for it.

"Will," Hannibal had stopped him before he left the office, "I hope that any animosity that may have developed between us does not affect our professional relationship. I know I have failed you as a friend, and I apologize profoundly for it. I, of all people, should have believed your innocence without hesitation.

"You and I once had a very productive working relationship. Hopefully you can find it in yourself to let me help once again."

Will had tried to smile, and succeeded, more or less.

"I hope so too."

As it had been a weekend, Will had arranged to meet Steve around lunchtime. He didn't know why he felt that someone needed to expect him home after his appointment with Hannibal. Even though he had only met Steve twice before, and they didn't know each other well, or very much as all, Will knew that Steve would care if the smaller man didn't show up.

The soldier was at the house before Will. He was sitting on the steps in the cold, mirroring a position Will had been in on a day that had seemed far away, yet so prominently recent.

Steve looked up from his hands and greeted Will with an honest, lopsided smile.

"Hi."

"H-Hi." Will hesitated, standing by his car and not approaching the house as memories flooded him. His hands shook slightly, and he wrapped them around himself to hide the reflex. "How are you?"

“I’m well, thank you.” he tilted his head, and looked appraisingly over the other man. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Steve looked over Will again, and nodded. He looked like he understood, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes; honest concern shining through. He rose from the steps as Will approached him, fumbling with his house keys to let them both inside and away from the brisk wind.

When Will shut down on people, he could usually sense how much they wanted to try and pry him open. He could tell that they wanted to keep asking him, to get him to talk about what was wrong, but were scared of how he might react if they pushed too hard.

The Brooklyn-born man didn’t. Although he was hurt, he seemed to generally understand the need for silence, and didn’t want to push for any other reason that Will didn’t want him to.

Will felt like he’d kicked a puppy.

“I’m sorry,” He paused with his hand on the doorknob, the dogs’ claws already scratching the opposite side in anticipation. It was easier to talk to the peeling wood that the man’s face. “I just... it’s been... I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing anymore.”

He leant his head against the door, listening to the sounds inside.

“Do you think you can figure it out?”

Will sighed. “I think so. Maybe. I-I don’t...”

“Here, let me.”

Steve reached around Will, his clothes brushing against him but avoiding physical contact as he put his hand on the doorhandle. Will hadn’t noticed his hand had slipped from the brass knob, but he entered the house as Steve held the door open for him.

“Thank you.” he managed to breathe. He could feel the dogs circling around his feet, but not jumping because they were good dogs. “I should get the leads.”

They walked side by side. Steve didn’t dash forward and back like he had last time. Although he seemed happy going the more sedate pace, Will could tell that a steady speed was not part of their usual routine. It was obvious in Peggy’s movements, occasionally moving ahead and trying to pull on her lead, that it was rare for him to not try to push his, and her, physical limits.

“You don’t have to.”

“I don’t have to what?”

“Stay with me. I don’t need a babysitter. I can actually look after myself.”

Steve glanced over. “I never thought you couldn’t.”

“Well, then, you are the first in a very long while to think that.” Will winced at the words. Steve had done thing to deserve that kind of tone, and he had done nothing to warrant the burden of Will’s problems.

“Why would they think that?”

Will stopped walking for a moment, and gazed up at the man who looked as put together and near-perfect as a human being could get; from his double-knotted shoes all the way to his precisely parted blonde hair. Although he knew from the story of Captain America that he had not always been like this, Steve was unequivocally himself. He was strong in his convictions and kindness. He would never have become Captain America if he wasn’t.

He didn’t think Steve could understand.

But, Will decided, he didn’t really need Steve to understand; as long as he listened.

“I spent... s-some time in the state hospital for the criminally insane. I was released about a month ago.” Will stopped and waited for a response he didn’t think he could handle.

He didn’t want to look up at Steve to see the expression on the usually open face. If the soldier disbelieved him, Will didn’t want to have to disappoint by correcting him and explaining what had happened and who he was, but he didn’t think he could stand the alternative. Steve could very easily reject him and not believe his innocence despite his release.

Will kept his eyes on the ground and wagging tails of the canines in front of them, who weree oblivious to everything except the sun and curious smells of past squirrels.

“I-I was innocent,” he answered the unasked. “Someone set me up, but everyone’s just been,” he took a deep breath and continued slowly, “they’ve been treating me like I’m going to break any second, and I’m not sure they’re wrong.”

Steve made a contemplative humming noise. “Which one bothers you the most; that they doubt you or you doubt yourself?”

“I’m used to people doubting me, and to doubting myself I suppose. My head is clear, it’s not like before, but they’re *making* me doubt myself, and I have nothing to... to hold onto. It used to be my frie-... psychiatrist, Doctor Lecter, but I can’t...” Will stopped walking, staring at the horizon, “I’m trying to get back to my life but I’m worried it’s just going to end up in the same place.”

Gerulf barked and pawed at his leg. Will chided him with a sharp noise between his teeth and the dog settled back. They were not used to stopping during their walk, as Will liked to keep moving, not only to try and prevent his mind from lingering on anything but to also burn off

as much energy as possible so he could fall asleep quickly and not have any nocturnal ventures.

“Maybe I should go back.” Will mumbled, not sure whether he was talking about his house or the hospital. He turned and didn’t wait for his dogs to reorient themselves before he started walking back from the direction he’d come, tugging on the leads.

He didn’t know why he was so desperate to retreat, but when he didn’t hear Steve at his side, or even following him, he laughed in a brief, somewhat maniacal manner.

One of the dogs whined, another almost growled at the strange sound.

It was suitable that he walk back to the house alone. Maybe he was supposed to be alone.

Alone and with his dogs.

Will was not naive enough to think that Steve, Captain America, was perfect. He was still human, after all, although recent encounters with interplanetary visitors had shown that imperfection was not a solely human trait. The blonde still seemed to be extremely well put together; he was perfectly designed, and nothing like Will, who was broken and only held together by stubborn hope.

Even if Steve wasn’t aware of it, and it really seemed like he wasn’t, it was obvious that someone like Steve shouldn’t be hanging around with someone like Will. He was too high maintenance and too much of a hopeless case for Steve to care about.

Such a public figure, a symbol of everything good, could only be tainted by associating with someone like Will.

The man had gone through one of the toughest times in human history, been right in the middle of it, yet he was so well balanced and strong while Will could barely exist. It just highlighted the weakness of Will’s mind as he put one foot in front of the other and felt more and more pathetic.

Heavy footfalls appeared behind him, he could barely hear them over the panting of his dogs.

“Will! Wait!”

The FBI lecturer kept walking.

“Will!”

Steve appeared in his field of vision, but overtook him and started walking backwards so that he could face the stubbornly still-moving Will. It placed the taller man directly in Will’s eye line, but he looked down reflexively to the man’s shoes and the uneven ground covered in dead grass and wet leaves.

Even with a wall of dogs between them, it felt far too intimate.

He hoped that his glasses, and the reflected afternoon light could hide any emotion that was threatening to spill out.

“Look, I don’t know what you’ve gone through, and I barely know you, but I’d like too, if you’d let me. You don’t seem...” He sighed, “I mean you’re-”

Then Steve crumpled down onto the ground

He had slid over the fallen, slick leaves while trying to walk backwards. The dogs lurched forward, desperate smother Steve with the joy of being close enough to lick the tall man’s face. The pull of the leads almost sent Will tumbling on top of the other man, but he managed to only trip on Steve’s leg and stumble to the side while remaining upright.

He looked down at the fallen soldier, or what he could see of him through the chaos of dogs.

Will snickered, and then laughed.

The tears that he had been carefully caging fell down his cheeks at the sudden spark of bright emotion. He swiped at his eyes from under his glasses and switched the loops for all seven leads onto on hand, so he could offer the other to Steve.

“Okay. If you want I’ll tell you... if you want.”

Steve propped himself up on his elbows and met Will’s eyes for a pointed beat before grasping the hand.

“I really do.”

The fireplace was still burning low; Will tried to keep it going throughout the day. The nights were getting frosty and building it back up was much easier than trying to restart it every day.

He had pulled his armchair close, not shedding his jacket. Talking, *remembering*, had made him feel cold.

Steve had stretched out on the couch, a mixed bag of peas and corn on his ankle and a compress on the back of his head. He’d claimed that he healed faster than most, but Will didn’t want to be the one responsible for damaging such an unbreakable person and had insisted.

He got the impression that Steve was indulging him the behaviour, but it gave Will something to do with his hands, and stalled his life explanation for a few moments while he could figure out how to say it.

When Will had eventually managed to start talking, the captain had been quiet and polite. He listened intently with caring eyes that made Will feel guilty about causing such concern. It

had taken a lot to try and articulate everything that had happened, there were large holes in his memory when the brain's swelling had gotten too much, and some events had overlapped with hallucinations and memories until they were undecipherable.

When he'd gotten to the part about Abigail's death, Will had excused himself from the room.

He didn't know whether to cry or throw up, so he did both.

When he returned, he knew that he had been gone for a while and couldn't play it off as anything unrelated. He was pale, shivering and he had abandoned his glasses on the bathroom sink so his red, puffy eyes were clearly visible.

Steve rose and sat up on the couch. Will protested when the bag of vegetables was places aside, and the hurt ankle placed on the ground.

"Don't stand-"

"It's fine." He remained seated, but looked up at Will and shifted to one side of the couch. "It's fine."

Will hesitated. He moved to the spot next to Steve but kept a patch of distance between them. He wished he hadn't put the dogs outside for some privacy, so he could pat one and have something to do with his hands.

"For what it's worth, I think you're doing the right thing by going back to work. Back to consulting."

"I can help people. I'm good at it. They need me."

"And you need to help them." He rotated slightly, so he was facing Will more fully, but ducked his head to catch his down-casted gaze and bring it back to him. "It's not the same situation, but," he laughed, sudden and self-deprecating, "I tried to be accepted into the army five times before they let me in. I knew it was foolish, and I probably wouldn't survive basic training let alone actual combat, but I kept trying. I probably didn't think about what would actually happen beyond being accepted because it seemed so impossible at the time.

"I ended up, even before the," he gestured vaguely to his muscular body, "I ended up being stronger than I'd ever thought. Physically, at first, and then after, when I was... The serum," he changed tracks, "only affected my body. Everything else came from the war... The point I'm trying to make...I think... Is that you can't know what you're capable of yet... But I think it's brave that you're willing to try again, given everything you've, you know, lost."

Steve frowned and stared at the fireplace for a moment. Clearly replaying everything in his head to make sure he made sense.

It struck Will that Steve seemed like a different person when he wasn't trying to be the leader. When he was simply talking about himself, rather than focused on helping someone else.

It was the man behind the uniform. Not just beyond the stars and stripes of Captain America, but underneath the military training of Captain Rogers, was someone more vulnerable that

Will would have thought.

He was surprised that he hadn't seen it. He hadn't thought the facade of Steve reputation would have obscured his vision so much, but as he watched the clear skin on the other man's face, the crinkle between his eyebrows, he knew that wasn't the case.

He just hadn't thought that the legend of Steve Rogers could have had anything in common with unremarkable Will.

"I didn't know who I was, after they changed me," Steve continued, unaware of Will's eyes carefully tracking his face, "but I knew what I had to do. I was a soldier and I had to follow orders, be patriotic, protect my men, stop Hydra. Who I was became shaped by what I was doing, whether it was fighting or hawking bonds."

"A-and you think, I'll find myself by going back to work."

Steve looked back up at Will, who looked directly into the clear blue eyes. "No. I think you know who you are, even if you don't know you know, and it led you back to the FBI. From what you said today, you seem to *need* to help people, and you just need to let that focus you."

"I don't..." Will wanted to look away from Steve, but couldn't bring himself to do something that usually came so naturally to him, "I don't think that's enough. I'm sorry."

"You realize you don't need to keep apologizing to me, right?"

Will laughed and looked down. "Yeah," Not able to meet Steve's eyes, his gaze fell on pink lips, "Sorry," he tried to joke.

Steve shifted and the back of a finger pushed Will's chin up slightly so there eyes met again.

"It's fine."

Something tightened in Will's chest, and he opened his mouth slightly to speak, but nothing came forth. He found his eyes kept flicking across Steve's face, and he was suddenly very aware of the lingering stuffiness from crying, the sweat sticking his t-shirt between his shoulder blades and the lingering stomach-acid burn in his throat.

"I-I can't..."

The doorbell rang.

Steve's arm dropped.

"I should leave." He stood quickly, as if scolded, and placed the washcloth and vegetables on the small table. "I... Thank you for talking. I really appreciate you trusting me."

Will followed Steve's direction, rising from the couch and choking on the words he spoke to the fleeing man's back;

“Thank you for listening.”

When it had been Alana at the door, Will nearly sobbed in relief. He had, for a fleeting moment, thought it might have been Hannibal following up on their session, trying to disarm him by appearing on Will’s territory, like he had for their second ever meeting.

He felt far too vulnerable to have to deal with Hannibal.

Although, Alana wasn’t much better. He could deal with her more than the doctor, but he’d already felt strung out that day and didn’t need any more.

“So, who was he?”

“I’m looking after his dog. Peggy” Will was proud at how strong and casual it had come out. “He brought her on a business trip to D.C., but wanted her to have a decent place to stay. The shelter gave him my number.”

“How long is she staying?”

Will smiled slightly. “I don’t know. Until Steve goes back to New York I guess.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “Will, please try not to get too attached.”

Something twisted in his chest and he turned from her. “I won’t.”

“It’s just that I know how you get with your dogs, and-”

“She’s *not* my dog. I know.” He turned and headed towards the kitchen to open the side door for the dogs. They had been fed when he had Steve had arrived home, so they would have finished doing their business and could be let back in.

“I know.” Alana mirrored.

Will heard her sensible heals follow him through the house, “So... umm... why the visit?” he asked the room in front of him.

“Well, I heard you had an appointment with Hannibal this morning. I wanted to see how it went.”

He grabbed the door and pulled it open. “You couldn’t just call?” The harshness of his words were softened by the sound of eight dogs snuffling in and clacking their way onto his old hardwood. They tracked in some mud, but he couldn’t bring himself to care; He was too busy ignoring why he was so annoyed at Alana’s drop-by.

The dogs gravitated towards Alana, remembering her as their mother for more than half a year. She hadn't spoiled them as much as he had, keeping them more as outside dogs since her house was not as big as his, and the weather much warmer, but they still loved her and were very glad to for her company.

They must miss the way she smelled, because they were all over her, and she crouched down to squeeze their faces with both hands and then rub their stomachs. It was an enthusiasm for the canines she had never shown before, and even though Will's comment had hurt her, and she was using the dogs to recollect herself, the affection was sincere.

Will looked away, feeling guilty about trying to put distance between him and Alana. He had been thinking too much about himself, not thinking that Alana and the dogs might be suffering and missing each other.

Then he noticed Peggy standing in the doorway, looking at Alana with her head cocked, taking a step cautiously forward with her nose low to try and sniff out the new visitor.

"Hey, girl," he said softly, feeling the tension bleed out from his shoulders as the foxhound looked to him. "Hey, it's okay. She's a friend."

And it was true. Alana was his friend. She had been the one to realize the encephalitis angle and she had always been in his corner.

There was no real reason why he should feel so hostile towards her.

Except she was too far in his corner, and he couldn't breathe with her so close.

She rose from the dogs and looked to him. What she was looking for, Will didn't want to think about.

"Alana," he said to her right shoulder, "I don't think you should..." He sighed, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Even looking at the patterned material on her arm was too hard, but he needed to dive in or they'd both drown. "You shouldn't *wait* for me. I've... I'm healed, from the encephalitis, but I-I can never be *un*broken. You know that. I know you know that." He dropped his arm and tried to look at her, "and I know you wish it weren't true, but we can't keep... ignoring it."

She nodded. "Yeah," she smiled lopsidedly, "I know."

Will could feel her disappointment and her anger. It was all directed at herself, not him, but it was painful to watch. He took a step towards her and hesitantly wrapped an arm around her. It was at an awkward height, but touching people was not something he was used to. It might make things worse, but for a moment he didn't care.

So he kissed her.

On the cheek.

And he didn't feel the familiar desire, the pull towards her that he used to.

“I’m sorry.” He breathed.

She choked a laugh or a sob. “I know that too.” Pulling back she placed both hands onto his face, forcing his eyes to her watery ones. “*I’m* sorry.” Her thumb brushed the corner of his lips, but she didn’t move in. “I’m just so sorry. For everything that’s happened.”

Will nodded, and lightly grabbed her wrists to lower them away from his face and return them to her.

“It’s okay.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Hi, sorry for the wait but I've been involved in a hannibal exchange and I've had to pause all my other writing.
> This is the second half of what I already had written. I didn't want to post it until I had time to start writing the next bit, which I do now! Hopefully I can remember where I was going with it and get back into the feel of it quickly for you all :)
> Enjoy.

The file didn’t have the kind of pictures that Will really needed to visualize what had happened. The descriptions were cold and clinical, more so than he could remember them being, which made him suspect that it had been tailored for him and his ‘delicate sensibilities’.

He decided that he appreciated the sentiment, but as the censorship was preventing him from being able to work properly it was inordinately frustrating.

Will flicked the file away and watched it sail off the side of the bed to land on the floor. Chances were that Bailey would drag it back to her dog-bed and sleep on it, she was weird like that, but he couldn’t think of a better place for it to be filed. He stared down at the paper for a moment, knowing it wouldn’t change into something useful without Hannibal’s approval.

He took the glass tumbler from the small table beside his bed and finished off the rest of his whiskey.

Will then returned it, and picked up the phone the adjacent phone.

He took a moment to stare at it, then at his bare toes that sat on top of his covers, which he wiggled contemplatively.

No, he decided, as he still didn’t know what to do with what he was feeling for Steve. It was new and slightly terrifying, but he needed to be away from the blond for a while to figure things out. If he didn’t, then he wouldn’t be able to separate what he was feeling and what he thought Steve was feeling, which he was sure were completely different things.

Instead of calling the man he wanted to talk to he sent a text to Hannibal. Even though Will knew the psychiatrist didn’t like the medium, he just couldn’t talk to the other face to face again. Not just yet.

'Hi Hannibal, how are you?' he started in the coveted politeness, *'Is it possible to have our next session sometime this week instead of next? I'm free any day after 7pm if you can fit me in.*' his thumbs paused for a minute, wondering how desperate he had to sound to get Hannibal to agree, but without putting himself in too submissive a position. '*I want to be cleared for work asap*. *Thanks*.'

He put the phone aside for a moment, not quite flinging it like he had the file but it had been a close call. Then he had to reclaim it to press Send, and placed it delicately on the table, as if it would explode if he put it down too quickly.

Will swore, squirmed around so he could shove his legs under the covers, and turned off the lamp.

Will liked lecturing. The room of students was always quiet. They listened intently, expressing themselves with only the clack of keys or the decreasingly popular scrape of pen on paper.

He could forget everything except the words coming from his mouth, but they were words he had carefully crafted and didn't stutter or hesitate on. He had his back to the slides, but he could knew exactly what was on them and knew there were no surprises or visions. He could control them; change the images at his will with the small devise he had palmed rather than be stuck in frozen terror, like when he slept.

It was also a time for him to clear his mind. Too reboot it, as it were.

He had been thinking about Steve constantly, and it was nice to have a rest.

Will generally didn't believe that friendship was something his personality was compatible with. He had always found it hard to have a relationship, of any type, on equal footing. There should be a give and take, a coexistence that was balanced between two people, but he had never felt that with anyone as he had always felt like a burden to the other person.

He had tried having a girlfriend in the later years of high-school. She had been sweet, quiet and he had hoped that her mild personality wouldn't impose on him, but it had. It was hard to reach compromise or a shared existence when so much of the other person made Will feel like he was being pushed out of his own mind.

There was always the possibility that the same would happen with Steve, but he seemed respectful of whom Will was. He didn't have a very invasive personality, the stronger Captain Rogers side was not as domineering as the other man would have suspected and the calmer, more *Steve* side seemed just as strong in its conviction while being very approachable.

One of his students has walked into class with the Captain America shield printed on a t-shirt, partially hidden under a blazer.

It had brought an honest smile to Will's face, one he had to turn away to hide lest anyone see.

However, once he had started lecturing, that person had blended into the darkness of his lecture room and all the worries and thoughts of Steve that had been stimulating his mind and preventing his sleep were, for a few hours, laid to rest.

“Alana tells me you have a new companion in your life.”

“It’s temporary. She has an owner; I’m just looking after her for a while.”

“Is she well trained?”

“*All* my dogs are well trained.”

“But she’s not your dog, yes? What is her owner like, have you met them?”

“Yeah, I’ve met him. He’s nice, he’s a good owner. Cares about her a lot.”

“Enough to place her in your care; which speaks of good taste. Have you socialized with him much?”

“Socialized?” he laughed self-deprecatingly, “I know it’s been a while, doctor, but I’m surprised you forgot me so quickly.”

“No so, Will. I am simply aware how much you care for your canine companions; for you to declare him a capable master is high praise indeed and you must have had some interaction with him in order to make such an assessment.”

“We’ve met... he comes around, every couple of days to... check up on her. Then he leaves. We don’t really talk much except about Peggy.”

“Peggy is the dog, yes?”

“Yeah, she’s great too.”

“Too?”

“... Great... *and* well trained... too.”

“I see.”

He was walking forward and there was something falling from the sky. Ash and dirt, maybe, but falling slowly like snow. It was strange, and he reached out a hand to catch some, but it wasn’t his arm. It was too big to be his arm.

He looked down at his chest, but that wasn't his either. It was too broad, too hard, and it felt like a stone statue wrapped around him to try and crush the small frame within. It was making it hard to breath, pressing down on his chest, and he could feel the beat of his heart trying to push against the sculpted marble.

There were four circles and a five-pointed star burnt into his chest.

But he didn't feel like Captain America, and he wasn't Steve Rogers.

He didn't know who he was and he tried to claw at the flesh, but he cut his fingertips on the sharp muscles, and broke his fingernails, forcing them up and away to smear blood on flawless skin.

He was panicking, what air he could get was coming in quick breaths and he tripped, his feet sliding on the slick surface of the ground and he fell forward.

Putting his arms out, he caught himself, but the impact of falling to his knees and landing on his arms sent tremors up his body. He wheezed and his hands shook as stress fractures ran up his stone arms like veins.

The ground underneath him was ice, but there were parts of his rock flesh which were eroding and crumbling from his biceps. It should have freed him up to breathe more freely, but instead it seemed to do the opposite.

He started down at the ice to see his face under the surface. There was a loud noise, one that stood all his hair up, made his toes curl and his whole body cringe.

He tried to sit back on his legs, but they crumbled. Blood and crumbled rock was gathering beneath him, and he felt tears prick his eyes.

He was losing himself.

The he looked up, and saw on the clear horizon a black silhouette of a human, or what looked like a human.

It had horns.

And it was watching him.

There were several towels rolled up and placed carefully within one of his bedroom draws. Although the faded floorboards were not the warmest under his feet during on winter night, it was still a much more welcome feeling than having to walk the cold tiles of his bathroom to where the majority of his towels were.

Will had curled up between two of the cheap cloths and tried to calm his shaking body.

The black, horned demon had not invaded his dreams for a while. They had stopped several months into his incarceration, although the shadows beyond his bars had still seemed to stretch into the antlers when they had switched to the safety lights each night.

It disturbed him that it was resurfacing. Will couldn't figure out why, other than the added stress of trying to figure out what was happening with Steve.

At 3:17am he gave up on trying to get back to sleep. He was cold, not wanting to put the covers back on to soak through them, but had hoped that the cool air would stop the nervous sweating and maybe give him something else to focus on instead of shadows and horns.

The dogs protested him getting out of bed again. They seemed to be able to sense whether he was getting up because he was distressed or when he was simply going to the bathroom, and came to him as he swung his legs off the mattress.

Will reached down to pat them, and mumbled something that would reassure them.

Normally when he couldn't sleep, he would go into his 'guest' room, filled with books and old case files that had been solved. He would read, or maybe try and work out a lesson plan. Sometimes he would tie flies, but only on the rare occasions where his hands wouldn't shake and he thought he could concentrate after a rough night.

He pulled his laptop off the charger in the guest room and padded his way into the lounge.

After checking the fire he sat down and stared across at the other side of the room, at the couch which he and Steve had sat on to talk. He checked his e-mail, and ignored a few messages from his students about a recent paper, before he flicked over to *youtube*. He had several videos saved in his favourites, general 'feel-good' things which got him through some darker moments.

'*Captain America*' he typed into the search bar, his pinkie finger hitting the enter key before Will could decide if it was something he really wanted to do.

Most of the videos that came up were news reports about 'The Avengers'.

Will had been locked away from the world during the alien attack on Manhattan. He almost hadn't believed what Doctor Chilton had been telling him when he explained the wormhole and aliens descending onto the city. Almost two dozen news papers, from all around the globe, had been collected by the psychiatrist and placed in Will's cell, so that he could adjust to the news in privacy.

He clicked on a general news report.

It was the first piece of footage he had seen of the attack and he sat transfixed on the window of chaos and colour.

There was something numbing about watching it. Will couldn't quite believe that something so horrific had happened in the world and he could be so removed from it. Even after he had

been released, he hadn't caught up with global events, more concerned with trying to rebuild the life that had crumbled so severely he didn't know what form it should retake.

In a few videos they showed Captain America dressed in blue, stared and striped, and even though his face was covered by a fairly unflattering mask it was clearly Steve. Most of the cameras had trouble focusing with the carnage, and were trying to find a good angle to fit multiple Avengers in shot, pulling back and refocusing as they searched.

He clicked on something else in the sidebar.

Will shuddered as the large expanse of ice from his dream came up on the window. He peered curiously at the large military compound that was settled around the side of the image.

"*-hile we are unsure of the agency responsible for the find, it is clear that the burial place of national icon 'Captain America' has been located and that the super soldier is being excavated from the solid ice of Antarctica*."

He shivered and looked over at the other couch, and the homemade blanket that was draped over it. It had a little splatter over it from when Steve had made his place in the mud. He didn't think the army captain had noticed it in his haste to leave, if he had then he would have been too polite to leave it there.

He chose another video to watch.

"*These are the hard working men...*"

Will pressed the mute button on the announcer. It was filmed silently, so he would watch it silently.

It was an old skittish reel, showing soldiers chatting as they walked along side an old tank, waving something around that looked like a twisted bit of metal. One of the men looked at the camera and mimed an explosion, which set off a chain of laughter amongst the filmed group.

The camera panned over and landed on Steve for a moment. The announcer was no doubt saying something about the famed 'Captain America' fighting for the American way of life, but that's not what Will saw.

Will looked at the footage that lingered on the soldier. He looked much more tired than Will felt, which was an accomplishment in itself, and he had dirt smeared over his face. He was frowning slightly at the other men, but in his eyes he seemed happy that this companions could be jovial in a time when very few people had reason to be.

He looked young. Impossibly young and unsure as he glanced at the camera before he walked past the shot and it cut to another scene.

Will felt himself smiling.

The men were pouring over a map. Steve was directing them with a sweeping gesture.

There was a compass sitting in the middle of their group on the map.

It had a picture of a woman; an attractive woman. Steve grabbed it, closing it quickly with a glance at the camera, clearly embarrassed and not wanting anyone to see.

Will's smile faded, and he felt like he had just woken up from one of his dreams with ice in his veins.

He slammed the laptop shut and pushed it onto the couch next to him.

Standing, Will stepped over to the other couch and wrapped the blanket around himself, falling to his side on the piece of furniture and curling up with his ringlets falling into his eyes. His head hurt from not sleeping and not wearing his glasses while watching to laptop, and he glared at the computer as best he could from the other side of the room.

He fell asleep with the image of the woman in the compass burnt on the back of his eyelids.

Will knew that Steve wouldn't be coming around or calling every day. He must have been busy on the army base, as that was the whole reason why Peggy was being kept in the house. For a moment, Will couldn't blame her for running away. He wanted to run away too, but he knew he couldn't because the urge to be found by the soldier was too strong.

That was, of course, assuming Steve would come looking for him.

He didn't think that he scared Steve away, since someone who lived through the middle of World War 2 probably couldn't be scared away so easily. It was possible that he had given up on Will, but he didn't seem the type to do that either.

But, Will thought, maybe he wanted to be given up on.

It'd be easier than wondering why Steve hadn't called and then wondering why it made him wonder so hard. Wondering why it made thinking of anything else so hard.

The woman in the compass had been spinning in his mind all day.

Will knew it must have been an old love of Steve's. He knew waking up and realizing that everyone he knew must be dead must have been hard, and someone that he... had *loved* had lived a life without him; knowing so many opportunities they could have had together were lost to time must have hurt.

Will felt a familiar tremor of guilt flicker through his insides.

He could remember the time so long ago when he had tried to make a move on Alana. Hannibal had said that his reaching out to her had been 'a clutch for balance', trying to create a focus in an unstable moment. It was possible that... whatever it was that had drawn Steve to Will's friendship was the same sort of impulse.

Everything in Steve's life had been taken from him, maybe he just needed to gain something sold once again, and then realized that Will was not stable enough to fill that role.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had thought that.

However, it usually turned to pity, and they turned Will into their project.

He couldn't handle Steve thinking that. Not with so many people already dedicating themselves to that task.

Will sighed, and decided that he couldn't think properly. So he picked up his office phone and dialled the extension.

Jack had wanted to talk to him after class, but Will didn't want to wait. He wouldn't be able to stand in a room and talk when he felt like such a lost cause, so he made a quick call to Alana, kept the tremor from his voice and was as professional as he could. She agreed to fill in for the class, and he agreed to leave the notes on the classroom desk, so she didn't have to face him.

Then he called Jack, and asked if he could move the meeting up earlier.

"Doctor Lecter has cleared you to work."

"He has?" Will tried to keep the incredulous tone out of his voice, but failed. He could tell that Jack was happy at the assessment, because it meant he could take his teacup back off the shelf, even though didn't quite believe the news himself.

"He says you need to 'cultivate an environment that provides purpose and peer accountability'. I think that means you need to get out of your house and talk to someone who's not one of your dogs."

Will tried not to let his body tense. It was clear to him that Hannibal knew about Steve, or, at least, that he had not been entirely truthful about Peggy's owner.

It was also clear that Hannibal didn't like that he had made a friend, and was trying to separate them.

"Yeah," he breathed an awkward, nervous laugh, "that's probably it."

"We've got no fresh crime scenes for you, but there are a few open cases." He pulled a few files over from the side of the desk. They were notably thicker than the one he had previously dealt with, and he could see the glossy edges of photos within.

Will swallowed as he reached out and took the file.

"Thanks Jack."

“Yeah, well, it’s not me you should be thanking.”

“*Hi, Will. This is Steve. I hope you’re doing well. I was wondering if you wanted to have lunch somewhere tomorrow. You don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but I’d like to see Peggy again, and you... I might have to go back to New York for a little bit and I’d like to see you again. If that’s okay? Call me back, please, and let me know... Okay... I’ll see you. O-Or not. But either way, call me back. Please.*”

Will had brought the FBI file with him while he waited so he could have something to do with his hands and his mind. The photos were making him slightly dizzy, and when he looked out at the small park, where the dogs were playing, he could see the body of a young woman in the centre of the grass, her body splayed open and pinned like a high-school frog.

A dog, not one of Will’s, walked up to and peed on her.

Her eyes opened, honey brown instead of the dead white iris that had been in the photos.

Then she started screaming.

Will covered her mouth with his hand. It was placed wrong, and she bit down on what flesh she could reach. It hurt, and he snarled as the tears poured down her face. He reached around to his back, and the knife tucked into his belt.

He raised it...

“Will!”

... And looked up, his heart racing like he had been caught and was ready to run, or fight.

Steve was looked at him, the concerned line between his eyebrows was back and Will looked down and away from the soldier. He was standing over the body of the dead woman, not sitting on top of her half-clothed form ready to thrust her open.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I-I’m fine.” He lied. “I-I don’t...”

Steve put a hand on his shoulder. It was warm and it took a moment before Will realized that he hadn’t flinch away like he normally would when someone touched him without warning.

Will looked back down on the ground. The woman was gone, and he knew he hadn’t killed her because someone was touching him. *Steve* wouldn’t want to touch him if he was a killer, and it was a wonderfully comforting thought.

“You don’t look fine. You didn’t really look like... you.”

“I was just getting lost in a case.” The detective admitted, “My first proper one since coming back. It’s a habit I have; loosing myself. It’s how everyone could believe that I... belonged in a mental hospital.” He glanced back down at the bare grass beneath his feet. “Can we go...” he gestured to the park bench.

“Yeah, sure. Can Peg come?”

Will looked over at the hound, who watch watching with a tail that was about to lift her off the ground, and smiled shakily.

At the confirmative nod, Steve gave the same sharp whistle he had on the day they’d met and he, again, picked her up and cradled her to his chest so he could carry her over.

“You know,” Will started, wanting to shake the macabre image from his mind with conversation, “before I met you I used to think I spoilt my dogs.”

Steve laughed. “I don’t really do it very often, and she knows not to try and jump on everyone.”

“She met one of my colleagues the other day. She seemed very hesitant. I’d thought you said she was good with strange people.”

“Was it that woman I met at your house the other day?”

“Yeah.”

Steve nodded, “She fits in better with men. She gets a little aggressive and defensive around other females. Sorry, I should have warned you.”

“It was fine. She was just a little standoff-ish.”

They sat next to each other and Steve let Peggy sit between his feet so she could be close. He left one hand scratching her ear, but angled himself so that he could still look at Will when they spoke.

“So you’ve got a new case? Is it going well?”

Will looked away. He knew it was just an icebreaker, but he didn’t particularly want to talk about it. “It’s not... coming as easily as it used to. I think I must be distracted, or something.”

“Distracted by what?” Steve asked, honestly curious.

“Everyone’s expectations,” He half-lied, “I think they want me to be able to do exactly what I did before, but I can’t. I just can’t.”

“It’s okay to be scared.”

He laughed, “I know. I’m very used to being scared. It’s just not particularly helpful right now.”

“Maybe you have to change what you’re scared of. Change it into something that *is* helpful.”

Will nodded and looked up into Steve’s open face. It sounded like sage advice, something that the soldier probably had to figure out for himself somewhere on the battlefield of the 40s. It sounded like something Will couldn’t do, but he would try. He would try for Steve.

“You’re going back to New York.” Will mumbled, before he realized he’s thought it. He blinked and looked away from the slightly confused, yet amused, face.

“Tomorrow night and I’m going to try to only be away for the weekend. It’ll be a week at the absolute maximum. I wanted to ask you if you minded keep Peggy for a while, just so she doesn’t have to move around.”

“I love having her.”

Steve gave Peggy another pat. “There used to be stray dogs all over the streets, so malnourished they could barely move. I would have loved to take them all in, but I was so allergic I couldn’t get near them. I used to make my friend Bucky go out and feed them, give them blankets. He was a good person, and you’re a good person too, so that’s one thing you don’t have to be scared about.”

Steve looked down and scuffed his toe into the dirt for a moment.

Will wanted to dismiss and ignore the comment made by Steve, blow it off like he did so many compliments, but he couldn’t. Not when it came from such an honest person, and not when it was something that was so important, even if it was eight months too late for someone to say.

“T-Thank you.” he managed. “I’m...” he had to pause, not quite sure what he was going to say, so he said the first menial thing that came to his mind, letting it come out in a rush of words. “I’m sorry to hear you were allergic to dogs. I can’t imagine many things worse.”

Steve laughed modestly. “I was allergic to pretty much everything, so dogs were just one thing of many too avoid. I read a lot, ended up much more literate than almost everyone on my block, so it wasn’t all bad.”

“It must have been... isolating.”

Steve looked up at Will with a slightly sad smile. He turned to angle himself more towards the profiler, and rested a large, warm hand on Will’s thigh. His eyes flickered away and he blushed deeply as he ducked his head, which caused a lock of his hair to fall in front of his face.

Then he looked back up, shifted his weight into Will’s leg, leant in and kissed him.

It was only a small brush of Steve’s lips against the corner of Will’s, more on his stubbled cheek than lips, really.

Will let out a shaky breath, and tried to stop his whole body shivering along with it.

“I... Umm...” Steve whispered, his face still close to Will’s, “I think this is the part when I start apologizing.”

“Please don’t. Please.”

Steve pulled back, “Sorry.”

“Apologize, I mean.” Will put a clammy hand on top of Steve’s perfect, warm one and looked away. “Don’t apologize.”

“... Okay. Do you, maybe, want to get something to eat?”

Will glanced back up at Steve before his gaze darted away.

“I think I’d like that.”

Steve had packed a lunch, which seemed strange, but it was nice. Quaint, Will had thought, with sandwiches that were clearly homemade, containing no more than two or three ingredients in each and every ingredient something nice and simple and clearly not bought from a mass produce brand.

There were seven different types of sandwich, on several four different types of bread. Steve had claimed that he hadn’t been sure what Will liked, and so had made a selection. There was also a fruit platter.

Will had enjoyed the tuna and mayonnaise and the turkey, cheese and lettuce. It was a nice change from the meals that were usually brought to him. As much as he appreciated Hannibal’s culinary skills, even something as simple as chicken soup seemed so foreign and far too extravagant for the likes of Will. The feast Steve had presented reminded him of the sandwiches he used to have when he was younger, the ones his father would take to work and he would take to school.

Steve had given Peggy a bone, but had also passed a box over to Will with seven others inside, for the other dogs back at his house.

Will was touched at the gift.

The conversation had flowed easier than he would have suspected. Nearly every other time Will and Steve had talked, it had been pointed conversation. The memory of the dead woman remained close, but Will was able to push it aside and focus on topics more casual. After a while, he could glance over to the patch of green without seeing her sprawled form bleeding into the grass, the deep voice with the tinge of Brooklyn accent focusing him away from the case and into the living moment.

They didn't talk about much, really. Will had mentioned his father, and fishing, which had prompted a lot of interest on Steve's behalf. Will had enjoyed explaining how to know the areas specific fish swam in, and the best way to catch them.

Steve was also very curious about Will's lures, which had thrown Will, slightly. There were still some negative associations for him in regards to his creations. He decided not to mention the connection to Steve, who was curious about the 'art' of the individual lures, and eventually Will found himself talking about the details with almost the same enthusiasm as his father when he had shown Will, a young boy, how to fish.

In turn, Steve had told him about his friends from the war. Will had liked listening about the Steve who he'd only glimpsed at in the surviving video records; the Steve he had slowly been getting to know.

He had mentioned a woman named Peggy, but only briefly as someone who had picked him for the super-soldier project, yet there had been a wistful note in his voice when he ghosted over her name. It didn't escape Will's notice that Steve had named his dog after the woman.

Will knew, without a doubt, that the soldier didn't realize the symbolism in giving Peggy's name to a bitch. Instead, he knew it was because Steve had seen Peggy the human as deserving of the love and of being doted upon as much as Peggy the dog.

Although Steve probably felt the weight of losing her, it was a testament to how much he respected those he cares about that he kept around such a reminder.

And Will found himself craving that respect; to be cared for and doted upon.

After the picnic lunch Steve suggested they go out for an early dinner the next night, before he had to go to New York, and Will agreed.

He offered to make reservation at a restaurant, telling Will not to worry about trying to find something last minute.

It wasn't until he got half-way home that he realized dinner with Steve may be a bad idea, and he had to pull the car to the side and convince himself that it was nothing worth hyperventilating about, and that it would be okay.

It was a decision that Will had never really had to worry about. A lot of his clothes, all his flannel shirts and jackets, were handed down from his father. The only somewhat nice piece of clothing he owned was a cheap tuxedo which he had been forced to buy for a social function he agreed to go to, but failed to attend.

He stood, dripping shower-water on the wooden floors as he tried to decide what to do.

A white t-shirt was a safe start. He put on a flannel shirt and his nicest sweater to cover up its old and tired state, then the tuxedo jacket over the top. It looked odd and didn't quite come

together properly, especially since he didn't know where they were going and what the dress-code was.

This was a stupid idea, Will decided, but refused to cancel. He didn't want to be responsible for disappointing Steve, even if he couldn't see his face over the phone, Will would still *see* it.

Steve was a good person, and he deserved a nice night out.

The restaurant Steve had picked actually didn't look so bad and not too upper-class, which relieved Will to no end. Even though he had a lucrative job, and could afford somewhere much more expensive, he was always happiest living a life which remembered his more humble upbringing.

Steve was waiting, huddled at the side of the building to avoid the drizzle of rain.

Will stayed in his car, circling slowly to find a spot to park as he tried to comb his shaking fingers through his hair and convince himself that he was, in no way, nervous. It was a lie, and an unconvincing one at that, but one he had to try and believe for Steve's sake.

He glanced over at the back seat and the tux jacket he really didn't want to put on. The car heater was keeping him warm enough that he didn't need it, but he wasn't going to pretend that the cold was why he didn't want to get out of the car. He wanted to have dinner with Steve, and the lunch they'd had the day before proved to Will that he wasn't overly awkward socializing with Steve.

Will *had* enjoyed it, which would have scared him if Steve wasn't so reassuring in many ways.

He could eat at the restaurant. It wouldn't be like the other times. He wouldn't drift and take in everyone in the room, just so he didn't... absorb the other person's frustration with him and start snapping at his date.

And it was, Will realized, a date.

A *date*.

Did Steve know he'd made a date?

Probably not. He couldn't recall seeing Steve carrying flowers, and he seemed the type. Possibly.

Will pulled his car from a crawl to a stop. The driver behind him didn't waste any time in leaning on his horn, but Will simply lowered his head onto the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths.

Steve had asked him out on a date!

The dogs were on the couch, was Will's first thought. The second thought was that *he* was curled up on the couch, his couch at home, and most definitely not in the car in front of a restaurant convincing himself to park.

He pushed himself up. "Where... H-How?"

"I drove you." Steve appeared from the kitchen, in a white t-shirt with a tea-towel flung over his shoulder. "You seemed a little dazed and you were mumbling to yourself."

"What was I saying?" Will asked; his voice shaky.

"You said you were a bad date, and said something about chickening out of prom. Then you started listing every date you've been on and ever person you've ever liked and what you think went wrong. It was all your fault, apparently," he took a step further into the room and crouched carefully in front of Will, looking up with his blue eyes. "You also said you deserved to be alone, which I disagree with."

"I-I don't remember any of that."

Will blinked down at Steve, wondering where his glasses had gone, and jumped when a warm palm was pressed to his forehead.

"I don't think you don't have a fever."

"That's comforting."

"Maybe I should get a thermometer to be sure."

"Maybe..." Will felt himself slump as the hand moved from his brow to his cheek. "Maybe I should call someone. Maybe make an appointment for another MRI... o-or with my psychiatrist."

"Have you been sleeping?"

"Not much." He admitted. "There's too much to worry about."

Steve nodded. "I think it might just be stress, I've seen in it soldiers before, but if you want to go to a hospital I'd be happy to take you."

Will brought a hand up, letting it hover over Steve's before gently removing the appendage from his cheek. "Don't you need to be going to New York?" There was a distinctively bitter note in his voice, but Steve didn't flinch.

"You weren't gone for very long, and I can always skip the Amtrak and catch an early morning flight if you need me here."

His eyes flickered to the man crouched in front of him, taking in his sincerity and concern. "No," He decided, quietly, "I don't want you to be late, and I'll be fine. I just need a good night's sleep."

Steve nodded, although it was clear that he didn't believe the ex-detective, which caused Will to pull away slightly and move back into the couch. He realized that he still had his hand wrapped around Steve's and, not wanting him to get the wrong idea and think he was needing support, let the appendage go.

He swallowed the urge to apologize, not wanting to draw attention to the action.

"I have dinner," Steve hesitantly suggested, "since we didn't get to eat. If you're hungry," he flushed slightly, "and it's not very fancy."

Will wasn't particularly hungry, but he supposed he should eat because he hadn't had much throughout the day and he couldn't help but smile at the helpful look on Steve's face. He agreed to follow the soldier through the house to consume whatever Steve had managed to create from the meagre contents of Will's cupboards.

He normally ate in the kitchen but there was not enough room on the small kitchen bench for two people.

Steve led him to the dinning-room where there was a table in the middle of the space with two chairs. Normally they'd be pushed up against the window and used as a desk, but the papers which had previously adorned it were stacked carefully on the corner armchair. The plates were set up around one of Will's pots, which was sitting on the wooden chopping board in the centre.

"I did a little shopping while you were asleep on the couch. I didn't go very far, just the little store down the road. Did you know the owner's daughter got a scholarship to Harvard?"

"No, I didn't."

Steve started placing a few small bowls around the table. "She must be brilliant. He's so proud of her."

Will smiled at the other man's enthusiasm as he moved towards the table. It was a scene normally too domestic for him to connect to, but Steve's conviction and warmth relaxed him as he took a seat.

Steve, rather than sitting opposite him like they would on a date, sat next to Will around the corner of the table, so they were closer, but weren't in each other's direct eye line. It was a much more casual position, and he didn't know whether the soldier did it deliberately or not, but was thankful.

"What's this?" he asked, while looking at the neatly chopped and roasted vegetable chunks in the bowls. Clearly, for Steve to have driven them both home, gone shopping and make a roast, Will had been out of it for longer than had been implied.

Clearing his throat, Steve looked away, embarrassed. "It's something an old friend suggested I try; Fondue." He gestured to the cooking pot in the centre, "I hadn't had a chance to try it because it's meant for more than one person and I..." he flushed deeper, "I haven't had anyone I wanted to try it with before."

“Oh. T-Thank you?”

Steve looked up and beamed. “I hope it’s nice.”

Will stretched his neck up to see the steaming cheese in the middle of the pot, and grabbed one of the wooden skewers, feeling eager to eat despite his dampened appetite. It was a much simpler than the dinners he had eaten with Hannibal, but somehow, the effort Steve had gone to in order to make this dish for Will meant more to him than the elaborate four course meals that were the Psychiatrist’s custom.

“You really didn’t have to go to so much trouble.”

Steve shrugged “I like cooking, and it won’t poison you, at least.”

Chuckling slightly, Will stuck a piece of the broccoli. He could remember an old dinner set his aunt’d had that included specialized forks for this kind of meal. “Are they going to stay on the skewers.”

Steve deflated slightly “I don’t know.”

Will gently circled the vegetable in the cheese and smiled as he raised it, watching the ribbons of pale gold. “Looks good,” he complimented.

The joyous, yet bashfully hidden, expression reappeared and Will felt a tight hold loosen in his chest.

He might, he decided, actually be able to do this.

“I don’t mind doing it.”

“You cooked,” Will scolded softly, “So it’s only fair that I clean up.”

“At least let me dry.”

Steve took up a position next to Will and started drying the plates that the smaller man had set aside on the drying rack. They stood almost shoulder to shoulder and he could feel the heat of the soldier’s body next to him through the cool air. It reminded him of sitting in the living room next to the fire, except his hands were elbow deep in a sink that he had sterilized a dozen times to try and remove the memory attached to it.

Dinner had been relaxed. Surprisingly more relaxed than the picnic lunch had been.

Will had been worried about his lost time, but he was almost sure that it had simply been an episode of anxiety coupled with being tired. He hoped, however, that it hadn’t just become a habitual response to stress.

He would make an appointment for an MRI as soon as he could. If it was something physical maybe they could catch it earlier this time.

Knowing that he hadn't done anything that would repeat on him later, and that Steve had looked after him, made him feel much better and, maybe, a little bit worse. He didn't need a babysitter and he didn't want Steve thinking he needed constant supervision, even though that didn't feel like that was what Steve was doing.

Will blinked as the plate he was washing was gently tugged out of his hands. He had, he realized, been scrubbing it for a while.

"I think that one's clean." Steve said slowly.

"Right."

Will picked up the next dish and watched Steve watching him out of the corner of his eye.

"Tonight was okay, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Will said, quickly "Or... the parts of it I remember."

Steve nodded and placed an arm on Will's arm, just below where the plaid shirt was rolled to his elbows. "Actually, I'd like to ask you something about that, if I may."

His heart sunk slightly. "Yeah." He focused back on the bubbles around his fingers, keeping his eyes on the plates, "Sure."

"When you were talking about the... the people you've had relationships with, you talked about Alana. Is that the same Alana I met before?"

It took a moment for Will to answer, so unsure about why Steve was asking and what he could have possibly said about her and his relationship. He hoped he hadn't mentioned why she hadn't want to be with Will. Even though he was not the most stable person, and it would not have skipped over Steve's notice, he didn't want to give the blond any reason not to want to be around him.

It was still quite baffling to Will why Steve was still there with him, all things considered.

"I don't remember what I said. But, yes, probably," He took a breath, "We liked each other, but it wasn't a good idea. We weren't... *compatible*."

"Do you want to be compatible with her?"

He passed over a dish without looking at the other man, "Not anymore." He scrubbed, "Can I ask you a similar question?"

"Of course," there was a clear frown and question in his voice.

"Who's the woman in the compass?" He asked quickly, before he could back out. Then, in the silence that followed, decided to clarify. "Your compass from the war. I saw a video of

you back then, and you had a compass...”

“With a photo of Peggy in it. I had forgotten about that; they hadn’t been able to salvage it from the crash site.” Steve set the plate down on the bench and rested his hands on either side or it, bracing himself against the surface. Will noticed the plate hadn’t been dried properly. “She’s gone, just like everyone else.”

Will nodded. He could remember the last time Steve had mentioned Peggy the human; how he had talked about someone who had chosen him for the super-soldier project.

He knew that naming his dog after her was simply a way to keep the memory of someone important close to him, when he had no other way to. It was also clear that people recognizing him beyond being Captain America was important, and if she was part of how he was chosen then he must have felt that she didn’t like him because of the experiment’s after-effects and his resulting reputation.

She must have, then, meant a lot to him.

“She meant a lot to you.”

Steve nodded. “She was everything I thought I wanted. She was amazing, but I was so focused on the war and Hydra that I don’t think I...” he paused to find the words, “*got around* to thinking about a relationship with her. Not properly, anyway. I just assumed that after the war, she would be there and I could allow myself to be attracted to her but then... Well...”

Swallowing tightly, Will nodded. “I’m sorry.”

He felt Steve’s shoulders brush his as the taller man shrugged. “She met and married a good man after I was gone. It’s hard to regret what happened when her life worked out for the best. I think... I think I liked the idea of her, but never got the chance to get to know her enough to love her.”

It was clear to Will that Steve believed her life had been better without him in it. It didn’t necessarily mean, however, that Steve wasn’t mourning her and what they could have had. The ‘idea’ of her was something that probably would always have a question about it. There was no way of knowing whether, once they were done fighting, they could have made a good life for themselves.

Will thought Steve was selling himself short, that she wouldn’t have lived a worse life had she been with Steve.

But he understood that it was something Steve may have needed to tell himself.

He took a breath in the silence and placed a soapy hand on top of Steve’s, without looking at the other man. It rested wet and rigid on top of the warm flesh and mustn’t have felt very comforting. Will couldn’t bring himself to remove the appendage once it had been placed there, almost as if his touch was magnetized.

Steve didn’t respond and, while the silence wasn’t uncomfortable, it did seem to stretch.

It took a few minutes for Will to realize that Steve was waiting for a response. It was Will who had asked the question, and the hand beneath his was not tense because of the soapy state of Will's own, but rather that he was trepidatious about the reaction of the smaller man.

Will blinked up at Steve from behind his glasses. The blond was looking at Will's hand like he expected it to retreat back into the soap bubbles at any moment, but he seemed to appreciate the gesture.

As he wasn't usually the one trying to seek eye-contact, Will wasn't quite sure how to make Steve meet his gaze.

He moved his hand from Steve's, trembling slightly as it rose and brushed against the far side of the soldier's strong jaw, towards the chin and moving Steve's head in his direction.

Will froze when blue eyes landed on him and all his plans to try and depart some words of comfort left. He felt his eyelids blink stupidly for a moment before closing completely.

He hadn't even noticed himself moving forward until his lips met Steve's. They were warm, which was no longer surprising him all of the man seemed to be warm, but it was very comforting to be pressed against, especially when the lips started to respond.

Will held his hands up awkwardly, as he didn't want to get the soapy water on Steve's clothes, but the bigger man turned his body towards him and pulled them closer together. He did feel slightly like he had been the one caught off guard, with his hands held up in the air and no real memory of how he had gone from wanting to comfort Steve to making a move to kiss him.

Slowly, he lowered his hand from head height to hang loosely at his sides, leaning his body against the broad chest and slowly guiding Steve's lips to move in tandem with his.

There was no release of pent up energy as Will had been suspecting. There was no strong, quick burn of passion that there had been between him and Alana. Instead, there was a quiet hesitancy in Steve's movements, and a strange level of care that Will wasn't sure had anything to do with him and all to do with the soldier being unsure with himself.

It occurred to Will that Steve's apprehension may not being because he didn't want Will, but because he wasn't sure *how*.

Will pulled back, his breath hitching at the sudden loss of warmth and sweet taste.

"Are you okay? Is this... okay?"

Steve took a long shaky exhale. "It's just that I never thought I could want this. I mean..." he closed his eyes. "I know this century is different. I just didn't think it would make *me* different."

Will nodded, not wanting to correct Steve, but he wanted to make sure he wasn't forcing the 40s man. "Is this enjoyable?"

"Yes. I enjoy spending time with you." He smiled shyly, "And I was enjoying the kissing."

“That’s good.” Will moved in and kissed Steve again, noticing how the other man’s shoulders were slightly more relaxed, and a large hand came up to cup Will’s rough jaw before they parted again.

The profiler took a step back out of Steve’s reach, deciding that he didn’t trust himself so close to the other man. He managed to keep eye contact, trying to convey that it wasn’t a rejection, just a cautionary move for self-protection. “When do you have to leave for New York?”

Steve’s face dropped slightly, he had clearly forgotten that he had to go. He looked at his watch. “I can stay for a few hours, but then I should call a cab, go get my bike from the restaurant and head to the airport.”

“I can drive you to your bike, so don’t worry about a cab.”

He turned back to the bench and the dishes. “Thank you.”

Will studied Steve’s profile for a moment before he placed a hand on the lower part of Steve’s back. His normal avoidance for physical contact seemed to be replaced by a need to feel the warmth of Steve’s body. “I know you have to go, but if we have a few hours here...”

“I...” Steve looked back over him, the line between his eyes telling more about his concern than shaking voice. “I’ve never...”

“That’s okay, that’s not really what I was asking for.” He said with a hint of amusement. “I can dig up the T.V. and we can watch a movie. We can just stick with kissing, since we both enjoy it so much.”

Smiling, Steve leaned down to kiss Will, but hovered, as if asking for permission from the man who had instigated the previous contact. It caused Will to chuckle and an honest smile to grace his lips before he used them to claim the other man’s as theirs.

For a moment, with Steve’s taste on his mouth, and heat of his body warming his smaller one, Will felt more connected to the moment than he could ever remember being.

It was eight, fifty-something p.m. He was William Peter Graham, he was in Wolf Trap, Virginia...

And life was... *okay*.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> This chapter doesn't have much Steve in it, sorry, but I felt it necessary to show a little bit of Will's recovery in terms of his work and relationship with Hannibal, because this is a post-imprisonment fic.
> If anything about what's happening to Will is confusing, just ask. I didn't want to place too much emphasis on it, because it's not as central to the story as the Will/Steve, and I think its clear enough for its purpose, but I may be wrong.
>
> The next chapter will have much more Steve in it, I promise. It may also be the last chapter, but I'm not going to commit to a total number because, depending on how the next chap ends, there might also be an epilogue.
> Please Enjoy :)

They hadn't watched a movie and they had talked, pressed against each other, but the night hadn't gone past kissing. Eventually Will had fallen asleep, despite his earlier lapse, with his head tucked against Steve's shoulder and a hand brushing through his hair. He had woke after a peaceful few hours of oblivion rested, calm, but disappointed that he had missed Steve's goodbye.

The dining room had been reset and the house had looked like Steve had never been there. The only thing that confirmed that the night had not been a hallucination was that they rarely treated Will with such kindness.

There had also been a hand-written letter placed on the bench where the dishes had been washed the night before.

Dear Will,
I'm sorry if you're upset that I didn't wake you to say good-bye. You looked peaceful, and I don't think you have that very often. Hopefully a good sleep will help your mind settle.
I want to thank you for last night. I wish I had a better way to say that, because it doesn't say what I want it too. I'm not sure what Shield wants me for, but I will try to be back when the weekend is over. If I'm going to be away longer than that I'll call you.

The start of a word, Will saw, was scribbled out and the next sentence changed.

Please call me if you need anything, or even if you don't. I'd really like to talk about what happened.
~ Steve

The cursive was small and precise and at the bottom of the page was a small sketch of all the dogs, Will's seven with Peggy in the middle. It was slightly stylized and cartoonish, with messy lines and soft shadows, but it was adorable. Each dog was clearly individual, with the distinguishing features of their breeds, and Will smiled as he realized it was probably the closest he had to a family portrait.

He folded the paper over a few times, so that it could stand as a triangle with the picture showing.

It went on the top of the dresser in his bedroom.

On Monday morning Will dragged himself into Jack's office. He didn't think there had been another body, but they hadn't gotten much farther with the case, just found some fibres on the body, and evidence of post-mortem penetration. After a weekend with the file of the slaughtered girl he was expected have some great insight into the mind of the killer.

Will wasn't sure he had any.

He heard talking through the door and Will hesitated before knocking.

"Come in, Will."

Alana sat opposite Jack in the office and turned her head to look at him as he walked into the room. "Hi," she smiled, politely, "how was your weekend?"

"Uneventful." He sat in the other chair, and turned to Jack, "What did you need me for?"

Jack's eyes flickered from Will to Alana, almost imperceptible, but Will knew that Jack was not the head of Behavioural Science without reason. He would notice some kind of tension between him and Alana, and know that whatever they'd had was ending. Will could already see in Jack's eyes that he had questions and he could only imagine how awkward it would be to try and answer them.

"We," Jack started, gesturing to himself and Alana, "were just discussing, well," he shrugged, not at all in bashfulness, "you, Will."

"I was worried that we hadn't heard from you this weekend about the case." clarified Alana, "You usually come in or at least call."

Will took a deep breath, "I haven't really been able to feel anything that hasn't already been deduced. I think your guys have gotten used to not having me around."

"But they haven't found him yet."

"And they won't." He pulled the file out of his bag and handed it back over, sick of looking at it, "he's not careful, clearly, but he can't be found yet. He's violent, he's a *mess*, but what he does is so far removed from who he is. It hasn't bled into his everyday life yet."

"Why does he cut her open?"

The question was to force him to think about the case. The file had supplied an answer, and although Will thought their conclusion was wrong he had nothing that better fit the pattern. Alana was clearly trying to spur him into his 'normal' way of thinking, before his incarceration had made him somewhat gun-shy. She was analysing him, trying to assess and see whether he was okay.

"Because he wants to see inside?" Will asked as much as answered. "He likes to look."

"So, looking at her organs gets him off."

"I don't... It's not a simple as that." He corrected Jack's bluntness, "There's more to it, but yes. It 'gets him off'."

"What more is there?"

Will prickled at Alana's calm, assessing tone, and answered slowly as if he had to drag each word from his very being; "I don't know."

"Yet." Jack forced his finish. "You don't know *yet*," he pointed, "but you will."

"Y-Yes. Right."

He looked from Jack, but then had to skim over the gaze of Alana, who was looking at him with measured pity. His eyes settled on one of the small ornaments on the bookshelves. It looked like a sheep.

"Okay then." Jack concluded, "Now, is there anything else I should know."

Will looked back at Jack, who had a raised a sly-looking eyebrow and cast a look between Will and the woman in the next chair.

"No, there's nothing else you should know."

"Alana?" Jack asked, turning to her fully.

She shook her head. "Not that I'm aware of.

"Good."

Will turned his mobile phone over in his hands as he sat in the waiting room. He had called to make an appointment with the hospital for an MRI, to try and sate the niggling voice in the back of his mind. He didn't particularly want anyone to know about the appointment, or the new bout of lost time, but it was too worrying to let pass.

Then Hannibal had called and told him that, even though he had given the all clear for him to return to work, it was still recommended that he have regular sessions to insure the consistency of his mental state.

It was not a suggestion.

It must have been guilt and over-protectiveness, Will thought, about not picking up on his encephalitis.

He had cut his working day short, making his appointment with Doctor Lecter earlier in the afternoon, hoping that Steve would call and they could get together later. The offer to 'talk' with the soldier made him uncomfortable, but somehow Will knew it was going to be okay. He was optimistic, for the first time in his memory, verging on the possibility of entertaining happiness. He had the suspicion that Steve was in a similar position.

In Hannibal's waiting room, Will continued to clutch the phone that had been put into silent mode. He didn't want to turn it off like he normally would in Hannibal's sessions, but he didn't want it to interrupt. It wasn't just rude, something Hannibal would not forgive him for being, but Will didn't want to give Hannibal, or anyone, more reason to suspect something was going on between him and Steve.

His phone ringing in the middle of a session would most likely prompt questions he didn't want to answer about their relationship.

"Will."

He blinked up at the European in the doorway. He was impeccably dressed, as always, and there were no previous clients coming from the room. Will knew that Hannibal took some time to consolidate his notes and contemplate between sessions, but also suspected the schedule was designed so that his patients would never be recognizable to each other.

"Doctor Lecter." He nodded and accepted entrance into the office.

"How are you today, Will?"

The profiler moved into the middle of the room and tucked his phone into the pocket of his jeans before he collapsed into one of the two plush chairs. Although Will's memory of his time in Hannibal's office didn't include an exact measurement of all the furniture, he thought they were sitting further apart since he had comeback from the mental hospital.

It was clear Hannibal didn't want Will to feel pushed into being too close too soon. Rebuilding trust.

The chairs, Will felt, were still too close.

"I'm fine. Starting to sleep better."

"I'm pleased to hear it." Hannibal closed the door and moved into the room after Will. "Have you been having any nightmares?"

Will shrugged. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"And what is 'ordinary'."

It was fair question, but Will sighed in grazing frustration and shrugged again. "Dead bodies," he answered honestly, "I think. I haven't been able to remember them very clearly. Probably a blessing, really."

"Do you awaken with any emotional attachment to the lost memories? Perhaps fear?"

Will frowned, "No, not fear. Worry, maybe? I'm worried about them, and about who killed them, and about myself, too, I suppose." He looked down at his knees.

While it was true that he could not remember what his dreams had been about, he was always left with the distinct impression that they were about the case. He hadn't been getting very far with it, as something was beyond his reach in the dreams that he suspected was the key.

He wanted to help, but part of him was still holding back; too terrified to go down the road that had once led him to the mental hospital.

"Why are you worried for yourself?"

"I feel threatened, kind of. I'm not scared, but in the dreams I'm worried about having them and what they mean."

"Is that a concern in the waking hours as well?"

"Maybe. I wasn't having them before. I've only been dreaming about the bodies since I've gone back to work, I-I think that's all it is." He shifted, not wanting to tell Hannibal about his weird Antarctica dream, or the black creature in it. "But I when I was reading the file of the girl I saw the killing like I had before, as if I was killing her, but I couldn't really *feel* him like I used to."

"Are you, perhaps, worried that you are unable to perform as you used to without this component?"

Will nodded. "I want to help people." He said plainly. "I don't want to remember the dreams, I don't want to go back to... how I was, but I'm not helpful like this."

Hannibal looked at him, a slight line appearing between his eyebrows in worry. "Do you believe your time with encephalitis has permanently hindered your ability to profile?"

"I... no. I can still profile. I can... I can still see the killer, see through his eyes and I can make deductions, just not with as big of an intuitive leap that I used to. It's just hard to feel him because I can't stop feeling like myself." He looked away from the eyes that had turned somewhat accusing, as if he knew Will wasn't telling him something important.

However, apart from Steve interrupting the apparition, there wasn't anything else relevant to tell Hannibal.

"May I offer a suggestion as to why that might be?"

Will nodded.

"Perhaps you are enjoying being yourself too much to let go and assume the persona of another."

"Oh." Will frowned. Maybe Steve did have something to do with it, and so it was best that he change the subject. "I'm able to visualize the killing now, though, where I haven't been able to since I was released. So maybe it's just going to come back in stages."

Hannibal gave an elegant shrug, one that said he knew the answer before the conversation had even started. "I believe you were previously inhibited because you felt threatened by your recent incarceration. I think that the journey needs to be yours, and that perhaps you have invested too much of yourself in the external world and your interactions with others. You need to assess yourself and find a place for your abilities to surface again."

"But it might not surface enough help."

"It will come in time. Perhaps with the next case."

"D-Do you think this guy will get away?"

"It's quite possible. However, you shouldn't feel it is in any way your fault. It's a lot of pressure to place on yourself, Will, you cannot expect to achieve the same results when you are not the same person, in very different circumstance."

Will nodded with a sinking feeling behind his chest. He did not want to believe that his feelings for Steve were making him too happy to work and be useful. Even though he couldn't remember being happy, and would not even describe himself as that even with Steve by his side, not yet anyway, he could never have imagined it could be a damaging thing.

He knew that he wasn't the same person as he'd been before the mental hospital, and he knew he would never be simply because of his experience. He hoped that Hannibal was wrong, and that it was simply because he was gun-shy about letting himself go. He didn't want to retreat into himself when so much of him wanted to reach out and be close to Steve.

However, he couldn't tell Hannibal. Will knew the psychiatrist was already suspicious about Peggy's owner, and even though he knew Steve could probably handle himself in any situation, there was an instinctive drive to protect him from Hannibal for reasons Will couldn't quite fathom.

He wanted the conversation to stay focused on work, away from the thought that anyone other than Hannibal could be affecting Will's life.

"I don't want more people to die. Isn't there some way for you to help me *now*?"

There was a moment's silence as Hannibal assessed Will, and the smaller man wondered if he had gone too far and disrespected Hannibal in some way.

"It's not recommended, but I believe I have something that might help."

"What?"

His mouth twitched into something that didn't quite seem like a smile "Hypnotism."

Burying his face in the only fishing magazine at the office, Will tried to ignore his gut and focus his skittering mind on the text in front of him. He'd had trouble focusing on anything is particular since leaving Hannibal's office. It was almost as if his brain wanted to think about, or do, something in particular but couldn't find what.

He couldn't remember what had happened while he was under hypnosis, but considering how sick he'd felt since then he suspected that it was nothing pleasant.

Hannibal said that Will hadn't done anything in particular, that he had mumbled about the dead body and refused to answer a large number of his questions. Though, he'd had a visible, emotional reaction to the psychiatrist's prompting and so the therapy had been deemed a success, despite no immediate improvement.

It had apparently unlocked something in his unconscious, and it wouldn't reveal anything until he fell asleep.

Hannibal had assured him that it was designed that way, so his conscious mind wouldn't be overloaded.

Will was told he wouldn't have any problems until then.

He was told, but Will couldn't be sure of anything. He had Hannibal's word, one which didn't exactly fill him with confidence. He couldn't remember anything, but he knew something had happened; something that had shifted not only in him but with his and Hannibal's dynamic. He hoped that it was as simple as a shift in trust, because he had certainly been reserved in their sessions. Allowing himself to be hypnotized was probably a breakthrough of some kind.

That he had allowed Hannibal such access to him mind, without Will's supervision, was most likely what was making feel as if he would throw up. He had only agreed to the hypnotism so that he could try and help with the investigation, even though he still had reservations about Hannibal.

He wanted the psychiatrist's attention off of Steve.

He wanted reassurance that Steve was a good thing in his life; that his relationship with Steve, or whatever it was, wasn't going to make him lose who he was. He didn't want to sacrifice himself for the sake of happiness, as neither were things he thought would last, and he was sure Hannibal would make him give one up.

Will set aside the magazine and headed to the bathroom.

There was a water cooler in the waiting room but he wasn't entirely convinced it would stay down so he retreated to the faucet. He closed his eyes as he lent over the sink and scooped water into his mouth, not waiting to look down into the drain as he drank.

He stood there for a moment before glancing up at himself in the mirror and running his damp hands through his hair to try and tame some of the curl. Removing his glasses, he pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to gather himself before his appointment with the doctor. He knew that the results of the MRI would be the most important indicator that something was wrong, but he didn't want to give anyone the opinion he was mentally unstable before then.

"Shit."

Will glanced up at the man behind him, reflected in the bathroom mirror. He was finishing up at a urinal and fumbling to zip his pants with his left hand. His right shoulder was bound with the strapping bandage crossing his chest over his chest and the arm in a sling, and Will glanced away, feeling awkward that he hadn't noticed the other presence in the small room.

He had noticed the man in the waiting room when Will had arrived, he had been sitting with a woman. He had quickly run their eyes over the two and deduced that they were closer than a couple, but weren't in a relationship.

His companion was with him for moral support, but they were both pretending he didn't need it.

"Here." Will stepped away from the single sink. "W-were you in here before me?"

"Nuh, I snuck in behind you. You seemed to be off somewhere else, really intense, but, you know, I had to pee."

"That's fair. I'll just..." Will pointed at the door and made to leave.

"Look, dude, I'll leave and you can stay if you need a moment. I know MRI's can be tough, I've had more than I'd care to remember."

"Yeah... I've only had one before and that was traumatic enough."

The man gave Will a curious look, as if he could see the truer meaning behind the statement. Then he awkwardly dried his hand off and extended it to Will.

"James Clint"

"Oh, err... Will Graham."

"I know it's none of my business, but I'm gonna assume you're here for your head, given the lack of injuries. Check up on a concussion?"

"Yeah, something like that." Will looked away, "I have to..." he gestured to the door again before quickly ducking out to prevent any more awkward conversation. He'd left his glasses

behind in the bathroom, but reasoned he could go back in later and reclaim them. He just didn't want anyone probing him when his mind hadn't yet rebuilt its defences.

He returned to his fishing magazine, full of facts he already knew. He tried to sit quietly and still, imagining himself explaining the intricacies to Steve and taking him out on his boat. Of course, he might have to buy a bigger boat to accommodate a second, very broad-chested, person.

The words in front of him were too fuzzy for him to read without his glasses, but he still pretended, just too keep his head down and away from the couple on the other side of the room.

He couldn't see the clock on the wall, but he knew his appointment would be coming up next, and soon.

"Hey, I thought you might like these back."

Will looked up to see Clint holding out his glasses to him and he went to take them from the other man, but then stopped. Clint and the woman had been there when he'd come into the waiting room, and hadn't had their appointment yet.

He'd requested the last time of the day to make sure he could make it after his session with Hannibal.

He snatched the glasses from the man. "Who are you?"

"Clint. James Clint."

"Why are you here?"

"MRI on my shoulder."

Will slipped his glasses on and looked up at Clint. The shoulder injury was real, he could tell from the movements and his own experience with a stab wound to know it couldn't be faked that well. There were circles under the man's eyes, trouble sleeping from the pain and not being able to find a comfortable position, the sense of uselessness in his eyes and the uncertainty about whether he could have prevented the injury had he only been more skilled.

But Clint wasn't there for an MRI, Will was sure of that.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the red-haired woman lean back in her chair, her gaze fixed on the two men. She was ready to spring, despite her seemingly relaxed posture.

"Then maybe you've missed your appointment. I could check with the nurse, if you'd like."

"Nuh, thanks for the offer though. We've got a special appointment with her later."

Clint nodded his head to indicate his partner behind him and winked.

"Jimmy." The woman warned.

The injured man snickered and apologized. "We're not here to have fun with the nurse." He needlessly explained. "We're kinda here to check out you and your brain."

"What? Why?"

"Because we know your history, Mr. Graham," The woman stated plainly. "and we were concerned."

Will frowned. "Did Hannibal send you."

The woman tilted her head, clearly not recognizing the name. "We represent Steve Rogers and his best interests, and no one sent us. Not really. We volunteered."

"Gotta do something while I'm out of commission." Clint gestured to his arm. "And we wanted to meet you, because Steve hasn't really made many friends since he was de-icicled, and now he has a boyfriend. We wanted to make sure you were on the up-and-up."

Blinking, Will found his brain stalled on the word 'boyfriend'. He appreciated the sentiment, even though he didn't think his relationship was a relationship, even though calling Steve and him *boyfriends* made them sound like thirteen year-old girls. Except that they weren't thirteen-year-old girls because they were, apparently, boyfriends.

"D-Did Steve say that? Did he tell you about me?"

"Nuh, he didn't." Clint took the seat next to him, "But we have ways of knowing these things. We're not following you though, I promise."

"He's happy." The woman interrupted, "We knew about you because he's happy."

"And then when he didn't return to New York with Peggy we found her ID number in a veterinary database and made a phone call. They gave us your name."

"We're not stalking you though, I promise."

Will took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. It was clear that the two were from some branch of military that Steve worked for, and although they'd said that they were there voluntarily it didn't mean that someone higher-up hadn't suggested that they volunteer. Most likely they were worried about the soldier falling in with the wrong people, someone with a history of mental problems and, perhaps, still unstable.

He shrank back in the chair, away from the two soldiers who were watching him. There was no way they would approve of him as an influence in Captain America's life.

He wasn't even sure he belonged with Steve. The man made him feel safe and calm, with both his strength and the sweet vulnerability, but he still wasn't quite sure why Steve was with him. He knew in his heart that Steve was sincere with his affections, but Will was having trouble understanding what Steve was getting out of their association.

Will knew it wasn't out of charity or pity that Steve had been... courting him, for lack of a better term, but he didn't feel stable enough to be a comfort to anyone.

Steve may not have realized that yet, but these soldiers might.

He wasn't ready to go back to how he was. He wasn't using Steve, not taking advantage of his gentle nature. He'd made the decision not to shy away from the happiness that had been offered him and that he would enjoy it for as long as possible. He deserved it, however briefly.

The two people cornering him in the waiting room were going to cut that short.

"Mr. Graham."

Will startled at the doctor's voice and sprung out of his seat as if it had caught fire.

He hoped that after the MRI the couple would be gone, but he doubted that would be the case.

On the way out of the hospital Will felt strangely calm. The doctor had looked over his MRI and said that there was nothing obviously wrong, no signs of the encephalitis, but had promised to go over it more thoroughly and get back to him in a few days.

The two soldiers weren't waiting for him in the waiting room, however he saw the woman talking to his doctor after he had gotten changed back into his clothes. Even though didn't like the looks of the conversation they were having, Will didn't mind much because he knew, at least, why they were there and what they were after.

He drove home with the radio off, a weird white noise in the back of his mind.

Steve still hadn't called, but Will suspected that maybe Steve's Shield organization were keeping him away with busy-work until their spies had finished their risk-assessment of him.

Their presence wasn't worrying him so much now. They explained Steve's absence, but also gave him the sense of being watched, which, to be honest, he didn't mind so much. In the light of his new bout of lost time it was nice to have a pair of bodyguards to keep an eye on what he was doing when he couldn't.

He was slightly concerned about what they were going to report back with, even though he had resigned himself to the possibility that they would tear happiness from his grasp before he was willing to submit to it, let alone be ready to let go. He got the impression that Steve hadn't mentioned him to anyone, and that their watching the super-soldier was how they knew about their relationship.

Will knew that Steve wouldn't be as appreciative of being watched as he was, especially if he wanted to keep Will a secret and not out their companionship to everyone in the military... or the world.

He pressed on the breaks and pulled the car to the side of the road, even though he knew he wasn't too far from his house.

Steve had promised he would call if he was going to be longer than a weekend, but he also written that Will could call him if he wanted to.

There was no doubt that he'd wanted to call Steve for days, but was trying to be patient. Will had trusted him to keep to his word and call him and now that he hadn't called, Will didn't want to seem as needy as he sometimes felt. The arrival of the two soldier spies gave him reason to not only be concerned about Steve, but to call him.

It took a long while for the phone to be picked up. Will was surprised that it didn't switch over to voicemail.

"*Hi. Will*?"

"I," he hesitated, not sure about what work Steve had been doing. "I hope you're not in the middle of something. I-I can call back later, or you could call me when it's more convenient."

"*No, no it's fine. Just give me a minute to get out of the hall and somewhere more private*."

Will nodded and then flushed at the pointless of the action. He kept the phone against his ear as the sounds of footsteps and shuffling came over the line. It was clear that Steve didn't want anyone to know about Will if he was hiding their conversation away in an abandoned room, which he didn't think anything of. He was thankful Steve saw fit to let him in to his life, he couldn't blame him for not wanting to let the rest of the world in too, just as Will was hiding Steve away.

"*Will, are you still there*?"

"Yes, Yeah, I'm still here."

"*Good*." The smile came across. "*I'm sorry I haven't called, I've been-*"

"It's fine, Steve, that's not why I'm calling."

"*I'm still sorry. I hope you didn't think I'd forgotten or didn't want to talk to you. I'm really glad you called.*"

"And you have time to talk now?"

"*I might be a little late to the debriefing, but they can start without me. Is everything okay? Are* you *okay?*"

"I'm alright, thanks."

"*Did you get the check-up? I know you were worried about what happened.*"

"I did." Will felt uncomfortable but warmed by the concern. It was clear Steve wasn't worried about Will like everyone else was and he was simply worried *for* him.

"They didn't find anything."

"*I would have thought that'd be a good thing, if nothing's wrong*."

Will looked down at the car consol. He didn't particularly want to relive the anxieties about a possible of a mental disorder. It wouldn't do either of them any good if he unloaded everything on Steve. Again. He felt bad enough that he was going to tell the kind man about the two soldiers, as he could tell that the scrutiny he got as Captain America was something of sore spot.

"Yeah. I-It's good. I... Steve, I met some people who know about us. They were checking up on us. *Me*. They were checking up on *me*, not on us. I think. But I think that someone suggested they make sure I was... appropriate, I suppose."

"*Damn*!"

Will startled at the exclamation.

"*I am so sorry. I didn't want Shield to find out about you, because they can be so..."* Steve sighed. *"I'll talk to the director. They didn't threaten you did they? Tell you to back off*?"

"No. They were almost supportive actually."

"*They must have decided to trust you, otherwise you'd never have known they were there*."

It wasn't a comforting piece of information, so Will tried to latch onto something that was.

"They... The woman said you seemed happy."

"*Well... I am. Are you*?"

Will glanced around the car, trying to find something to reassure him that everything was okay.

"I..." he stalled before continuing apologetically, "I-I don't want to jinx it."

Steve chuckled. "*I can understand that."* there were some ambient noises and a mumbled voice, *"I have to go. I'll talk to the director about the agents; you deserve to be treated better than that*."

Will closed his eyes. "You do too. Deserve to be treated better, I mean, and you should tell them that."

"*That's... Thank you, Will*." There was an audible smile, and Will found himself smiling in spite of himself.

"Do you know when you're coming back?"

"*Soon. Sooner if I have any say the matter and I will come back*."

The relief he felt at Steve's confidence made him slump forward and rest his head on the steering wheel.

"Thank you," he breathed.

The grass was damp, but not unpleasant. Will closed his eyes as the sun shone down on his face, warm and happy. He had one arm behind his head and the other across his waist, waiting patiently for something he didn't know would arrive. Something he had been waiting to come to him for a long time.

He had his eyed closed, feeling content just lying there in wait without anxiety or rush.

It was peaceful.

Will felt a hand brush down his arm and to his wrist with a light, almost caring touch. It was gripped loosely, but with a note of possessiveness that made Will smile inexplicably. He felt he knew who it was, someone who cared about him deeply, without having to open his eyes.

He could feel the man breathing against him and something wet falling on his face.

Tears? Rain?

The grip on his wrist tightened to something painful and Will opened his eyes.

On top of him was a blackened creature with massive horns and long fingers. It was familiar and it was terrifying, but when he opened his mouth and started to scream the second grotesque, misshapen hand clamped itself over his lips. The long fingers ran across half of Will's face, obscuring the vision in his right eye, with the heal of his hand against his mouth and palm crushing his nose.

Will, on instinct, tried to buck dark form off of him and bit down on the thing's hand.

His mouth and nose filled with tasteless goo, a substitute for blood from the inhuman form.

He choked and gagged.

"Ssssshh." The thing hissed.

It removed its hand from Will's wrist and reached behind his back for a moment. The motion would have allowed Will to push it off were he not panicking so much about being unable to breathe.

There was a glint of metal above him that drew his attention, focusing him amidst pounding anxiety. At first he thought it was a knife, it had the same colour and reflection, but it was a claw. One massive claw amongst the others.

Will felt the tears fall from his eyes as he squeezed them shut, already feeling the darkness creeping upon him as the blood brought him down into unconsciousness.

But there was a sharp pain in his abdomen, the feel of a knife which flung his eyes open. He stared into the blackened face, his body already sucking the blood into his lungs to attempt one final scream.

Will cleared his throat, his voice hoarse and unrecovered from the night before. He had woken to Peggy and Winston perched on his bed and whining in his ear, trying to rouse him. Although he did not remember being able to produce any sound, his larynx, as well as the worried and skittish behaviour of his dogs, said differently.

He could probably have soothed it with tea if he thought that feeling anything in his throat was an option. As it was, he hadn't had anything to drink all day, not even coffee, as the ache in his head could attest to.

He'd hoped that talking throughout the day would return his voice, but it hadn't. By his third and final class Will was relieved that he could leave the confines of his classroom and go home.

There was the worry that he would be accosted by Jack as he left the building, or even Hannibal wanting to see how his hypnosis went.

Will just wanted to go home and try to distract himself until he had to try and fall asleep again.

As he watched the students file out of the room, his eyes fell on the familiar Captain America t-shirt that had been a consistently sitting in his class. It was lingering back behind the FBI uniforms and Will blinked at the sling that crossed over it. He must have been blinded by the shield and the memory of Steve to not remember that all students were cadets, and required to dress as such; making the shirt an anomaly.

"You've been sitting in on my class."

"Yep." Clint grinned.

It was clear that the man and his female partner had been watching him for much longer than they had initially let on, but Will still didn't feel overly threatened by them. Despite Steve's worry, the profiler got the distinct impression that the two were more concerned about the welfare of the Avenger rather than their superior officer's orders. Will's mental stability was probably less important to them than whether he seemed the type to screw Steve over.

Will frowned at the smiling man, deciding he should probably cut him some slack if he was friends with Steve, and tried to find something relatively congenial to say; something that wasn't about Steve and didn't resort to talking about the weather.

"So how are you finding it?"

"Good, actually. I'm usually the guy Shield sends in after the smart people have done the psych work-up. It's interesting."

A smile tugged at the corner of Will's mouth, its presence surprising him. "Well, I'm glad you're getting something out of... whatever it is you're doing here."

"Well, I'm not officially on assignment, my partner is. I was kinda just wanting to see how long I could hang around before someone realized I wasn't a student."

"Well... Look, James, I won't tell anybody about it, if you don't mention me and Steve to anyone."

Clint tilted his head a little as his smile grew soft. "It's Clint Barton, actually, and I've got Tony Stark breathing down my neck about this, so I can't make any promises." He took a small step forward, closing some distance between them without making Will feel crowded. "I can promise you I won't tell anyone who will interfere. We won't *let* anyone interfere."

Will recognized it as a promise that he wouldn't say anything to his superiors that would paint Will as a threat or bad influence. He nodded his thanks to Barton, who smiled and tipped an invisible hat.

"Steve got into DC a few hours ago, he texted me in class that he was going straight to your place. Should be there by now..." He smiled with his tongue between his teeth as he turned away, leaving the unsaid suggestion thumping in Will's chest.

"Right." He breathed to the retreating back. "Right."

Will hadn't had much grief on his way out of work. Alana had intercepted him, wanting to talk and to deliver a message from Jack to see him in his office.

It hadn't taken much to dissuade her and to relay to Jack that he was just going to go back home. He begged off, claiming a headache, and his sore sounding voice seemed to make her particularly sympathetic to his plight.

His phone, which he had kept on silent during his teaching class, had received a text. Steve hadn't said much in it, except that he would be at a small cafe where Will could find him whenever it was convenient. There was nothing in the text that made it seem urgent, quite the opposite, and Will wondered if his unfamiliar bubble of excitement and anticipation was one-sided.

The cafe wasn't far from the farm house and served as the local general store. Steve was sitting inside where he could clearly be seen from Will's parked position. He was reading a newspaper, something which the approaching man found very endearing, having had his fill of digital media in recent years.

Will entered the cafe feeling uneasy. He could remember the last time he had tried to meet Steve, and as he passed through the door he cast his eyes around the room to try and commit the details to memory, as he didn't want them to slip from him due to his nerves.

"Will!" Steve's face lit up as he set his paper aside. "Are you hungry?"

Will looked down at the massive plate filled with bacon, sausages, toast, tomatoes, beans and eggs. Although it was later in the afternoon, Steve must have charmed the kitchen to making one of their breakfast specials.

"No, thank you."

Steve winced. "You sound terrible. Are you feeling okay?"

Will sat opposite him in the booth. "I'm fine. Just been lecturing too much I guess. Coffee should help." He signalled down the waitress, managing to tear his gaze away from the bright blue eyes to do so.

He had been worried that the two of them would be awkward given their previous encounter. The last person he had kissed was Alana and that hadn't led to anywhere comfortable. Will wasn't sure how to act around someone he liked who actually liked him back, but the energy that had been fizzing through him since Steve left had since settled.

He was calm and content sitting opposite Steve. The darkness of the night before seemed forgotten.

Steve waited until Will had taken a deep sip from his cup before reaching out to lightly touch his arm. "I'm sorry about Clint and Natasha, but they're my friends and I spoke to them. You won't see them again and I am so sorry they invaded your privacy like that. Shield won't be sending anyone else either."

"I didn't mind Clint. He was surprisingly genuine for a spy."

"He is. He's been out of work for a while because of his shoulder, so I think he liked being of the base and feeling useful."

"I'm... glad I could help?"

Steve gave an apologetic smile, glancing down at his plate in a moment of shyness. "I'm sorry I couldn't come back earlier. I didn't like where we left it that night."

Will frowned as he remembered how content he'd felt after they'd finished talking and he had drifted off to sleep on the couch, his head on Steve's shoulder. He very rarely talked so casually with someone, with most wanting to discuss his work or health, and he hadn't thought he could have liked talking about movies and books so much.

"I liked it." He mumbled.

"No." Steve corrected quickly, "I loved it, but I know you were worried about making the appointment with the hospital and having another brain infection, and I don't think I did much

to help."

Will looked away, "I thought the kissing helped."

"I thought you... I was worried I was doing it more for me than you. I'm..." Steve sighed, "not really sure what I'm doing here."

The frustration in his voice caused Will to look up at the other man, who was now forking some food around his plate. It was clear that something had changed with Steve while he had been away, and Will could see in his eyes that their relationship had begun to shift before it had even taken on form. He just didn't know if it was going to grow or fade away.

"Steve, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong; just confusing."

Will nodded and finished his coffee. It was clear that Steve didn't want to talk about it in the small cafe, if at all, but he hoped the blond knew that he would always be willing to listen.

"Anything I can do?"

Steve looked up from his meal and met Will's eyes with his azure ones. He looked tired, but happy that Will was sitting opposite him and he smiled with a small but honest expression of contentment.

"Just be yourself. That'll help me more than anything else, I promise."

Will nodded again. He reached out a trembling hand and mimicked the touch Steve had given him earlier, brushing his fingers against the fine hairs of Steve's arm. He was never one for public displays of anything, let alone physical contact, but he it was comfortable and it was enough to comfort him, as he suspected it was for the modest 40s soldier too.

"I'm pretty sure I can get this to go. It seems a shame that you dug out your television and we never got to watch it."

"Sounds good."

The grass was damp, but not unpleasant. Will closed his eyes as the sun shone down on his face, warm and happy. He had his eyed closed, feeling content just lying there in wait without anxiety or rush. Just peace.

Will felt a hand brush down his arm and to his wrist with a light, almost caring touch. He felt he knew who it was, someone who cared about him deeply, without having to open his eyes.

Will opened his eyes, regardless.

Steve was on top of him, his muscled mass pressing down on Will's frame. His hair was almost too bright to look at but his eyes were darker, almost red as blood, and there were massive shadowed horned protruding from his head. He had a face that was twisted into something inhuman, pure glee and lust, which seemed to paralyse Will with its terrifying familiarity.

"*No*. *Not you*." Will tried to say, but when he opened his mouth all he'd wanted to say was drowned in the sound of him screaming.

Steve's hand clamped over Will's mouth, cold, as if he were already the corpse, and fingers ran across his eyes, the hand placed vertical rather than horizontal. He felt his nose start to break, and he dug his teeth into the heel of Steve's hand.

His mouth and nose filled with sickly sweet blood, stinging his teeth like too-cold water and filling his mouth like oil.

Will choked and gagged.

"Hush, Will." Steve whispered, his voice deep and warm, with another strange accent hidden deep behind the tones of Brooklyn. "Hush"

He removed his other hand from Will's wrist and reached behind his back for a moment and produced a knife from his belt. It wasn't as large as Will had been expecting, but something from the pages of a report whispered to him that it was a tourne knife. Will felt the tears fall from his eyes as he squeezed them shut, wishing he could simply die and not have to witness Steve doing this.

But there was a sharp pain in his abdomen, the feel of a knife which flung his eyes open. He stared into the pristine face, full of lust and possession and tried to breath around a mouth full of blood and disgust in an effort to produce one final noise.

And he did, but his wasn't the mouth is came from.

"*No. NO*!" Steve screamed, grabbing at Will's face before darkness finally freed him from the scene.

And Will woke, choking on nothing by air.

Breathing deep the smell of dog and sweat, he made a choked sound as he tried to calm down enough to uncurl from the foetal position that he usually slept in. It seems that he hadn't tossed and turned too much while he'd dreamt, there was still the sound of sleepy breathing behind him and a hand resting on his waist.

Steve's arm must have wrapped around him after Will had fallen asleep, but it'd seemed he had pulled away from the solid body at some point in the night. He felt his clothes sticking to him and he gently moved himself out from under the appendage so that he could plant his feet on solid ground and strip off his shirt.

Scattered around the room, his dogs regarded him with different levels of wakefulness, all familiar with and concerned by Will's night habits. Peggy was the only one who wasn't, but she had settled herself on the other side of the bed, nearer to Steve, and he couldn't see her.

He didn't want to have to fetch the towels that he normally would use to line his bed after such a dream, not wanting Steve to think less of him because of their presence. He shivered and wrapped his arms around his torso as he stood to find more clothes, something he normally wouldn't bother with, but lying next to Steve naked would probably scare the other man away.

When he returned, Peggy was whining from her position and it drew Will to that side of the bed.

He looked over at Steve and noticed the two little lines that appear between his eyebrows when he was stressed, even though he was lying still.

Will leant over and put a hand on Steve's bicep, feeling how tense and immobile it was.

When the two of them had decided that they were too tired to think of anything but sleep, and so Steve should stay the night at Will's, the ex-homicide detective had warned Steve about his night habits. Although it had been the first time he'd actually told someone about his night sweats, as Hannibal only knew about the dreams, it had been surprisingly easy to recover from the embarrassment.

Steve hadn't made a big fuss about the news. He had told Will about a few of his teammates from the war, about the troubles they'd had sleeping knowing what was behind and not knowing what was ahead. He'd reassured Will that he could even sleep through distant gunfire and bombing, but if he ever needed him then he could be woken by someone saying his name; something that had been ingrained him from surprise attacks.

In their conversation, Steve hadn't said anything about his own night demons and Will hadn't asked.

He wondered what it was that plagued Steve. Maybe it was something from the war, the alien invasion that had happened or something newer.

Will wondered how Steve was so supportive about his issues, when it was clear that the captain had a much bigger picture weighing him down. He moved his hand down the hard bicep, stroking it gently as he felt his heart shift uncomfortably.

"Steve?"

"Hmmmuhhh."

Will felt the flesh under his hand relax and body slump as Steve was drawn out of the sleep turmoil by his name. He shifted and rolled onto his back, rubbing the sleep from his eyes before looking up at Will, as alert as he would have been if he'd already had a morning coffee.

"Will?"

"You were having a nightmare... I-I thought, maybe, you'd like to be woken from it."

Steve blinked for a moment before he pushed himself into an upright position, flushing as he cleared his throat. "Thanks, but why are you up?"

"Same reason really."

Will sat down on the side of the bed and looked over at Steve who was looking over at the soaked sheets where Will had been laying. They were visibly damp from the sweat and the profiler felt a prickle of jealously about how composed the larger man was after having his sleep disturbed. Even after having their talk, Will was embarrassed at the scrutinizing and slightly sympathetic gaze Steve levelled on him.

"Are you alright?"

The face from his nightmare was still ringing in his head and he looked away from Steve. He didn't want to talk about what he'd seen, worried that it might make Steve feel uncomfortable or unwanted, so he nodded in the direction of his bare feet and shrugged before forcing himself to look back up.

"Are you?"

"I'm fine. It's not the first time, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's just..." Steve ran his hands over his face, "memories from the war. People I've lost."

Will nodded. He used to think he could do something about his dreams, but he knew now that he needed them.

"... And I don't want to lose you too."

Will wondered if perhaps he had missed out on something, and a moment of panic gripped him as he remembered the feel of Steve's hand over his mouth and the knife cutting into him.

"L-Lose me?"

"Shield offered me permanent placement in New York and I don't know if I want to take it or not. War's changed since I was in it, and I don't know how long I'll be useful here on the base."

Smiling sadly, Steve reached out and placed a hand on Will's leg. "I... Don't know where this is going, but I really like you, Will. There aren't many places, o-or people, in this century that feel like home, and I don't want to leave yet."

Across from the worried man, Will felt the tension release from his spine and he was able to lean himself forward to press his lips against Steve's warm ones. They slowly moved in tandem for a moment, and his body trembled as it leant in to touch Steve's as confident arms wrapped around him.

They rolled over, Steve's strength shifting them across the bed and Will felt himself on top of where he had been lying before, the remnants of his dream pressing against his arm and side.

"Wait."

Steve froze on top on him, one hand pushing up Will's t-shirt and resting on the planes of his stomach, rough and warm on his uncarved flesh.

He pushed himself up to look Will in the eye. His pupils were dilated, but the thin rings of blue displayed enough concern to be overwhelming. He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. His lips parted and he took a small aborted breath, as if he was about to ask Will what was wrong, but thought better of it.

Will looked up at the man who was putting his needs above everything out. Putting aside his own needs to ensure Will was okay.

He kissed Steve again, light but unhindered by memory.

Even with the face from his dream still singing in his head, he knew that Steve, so pure and wonderful, could never be that creature. He would never be able to do anything to hurt Will, by accident or otherwise.

As long as it was Steve's face in his nightmares, he could be sure that they were just that and not something that could hurt him.

Steve withdrew.

"Are you sure you want this?"

Will smiled, small,l but with all the emotion that could fit. He sat up and discarded his clean t-shirt before pawing at the hem of the other man's, trying to encourage him to also sit up and de-shirt.

"I can honestly say I have never been surer of where I am and what I want."

Steve smiled brighter than he had ever seen, just as much for Will as for himself, and Will couldn't help but return it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a little muddled. I feel like I'm losing my grip on the character's slightly, but I don't know if that's because of how they've developed in the story or whether I'm just off the rails so please comment and let me know if anything feels off. Also, they'll be more Hannibal in the next chap, so don't worry too much.
> Enjoy.

Will woke that morning on his own terms. He had not closed the window, as he was usually started awake before the sky got too bright, and he was roused with squinting eyes and a glare off the mirror.

He groaned and was about to shift only slightly before he acknowledged the weight on his shoulder.

There was a mess of blond hair tucked under his chin and an arm across his chest. Steve was breathing evenly, but when Will ran a hand through the hair, slightly dry from the remaining product, he rolled further into the small man and seemed to give a silent, contented sigh.

His nose was cold as it brushed against Will's skin, which made him smile.

The conscious man looked over to the rest of the room and the collaboration of canine watchers who were all content to lie on their pillows and wag their tails. It was clear that they were in no hurry to greet him as they usually did, aware that, for once, there was no distress in Will that required their attention.

However, the bed shifted as a collection of fur bounced up onto the bed and shuffled over to Steve and lay on top of him.

"G'off Peg." Steve mumbled, but didn't move to shift her.

Will laughed and reached around to pat the English foxhound on the head. He shifted through Steve's grip, carefully repositioning the two of them so that he was sitting up and the unfrozen soldier was resting his head on Will's bare thigh.

Normally dogs were not allowed on the bed while he was in it, and he didn't want to start making exceptions, but he looked down at the two newest bodies in his life and smiled. The sun caught the white paper on the dresser, reflecting too much for him to see the sketch that adorned it, but he had memorized the lines there regardless.

He nodded to his dogs, making a small whistle between his teeth that spurred the movement of seven quadrupeds, excited about being allowed to join their master on his territory. They jumped up onto the bed, sinking the mattress down and clamouring their trimmed claws over Steve's exposed back and Will's legs.

"Kirk," he scolded the larger dog, "lay."

The ecstatic dog looked at him for a confused moment before lowering his body down onto the bed. Will reached over to give him an encouraging pat, but detoured to push Holly off of Steve, who was licking the still sleeping man's face.

It seemed that Steve was true to his word, and refused to wake for anything other than his name being spoken. It made Will wonder how familiar he was with the sensation of being licked to not flinch away from it, and he chuckled at the thought of the green hulking creature slobbering on the face of Captain America.

Running a hand through Steve's hair again, Will ignored the pull of his bladder and looked around to try and find something to occupy himself until Steve was ready to wake up naturally. He didn't have any books nearby, but he made a grab for his phone, which rocked Steve with the movement. There weren't any games on the device, but he flicked through for a while before pressing the device to his ear.

"*Agent Jack Crawford*."

Will cleared his throat and attempted to sound as dry and croaky as he had been the day before. "Jack, it's Will."

"*Will. Do you have something about the case*?"

"No. Sorry. And I'm not coming in today, I'm not well."

There was a weird pause from Jack, and Will tried to remember whether he had stuttered or given himself away to the profiler.

"*Are you alright*?"

"Yes. No. It's not like that. It's just a cold, no fever or anything."

"*That's good."* He sounded surprised but sincere, *"Alana said you weren't feeling well yesterday. I'll get her to cover you for two days. Relax. See what you can come up with while you recover. Okay*?"

"Yes. Okay."

"*And call me when you have something*."

"Okay."

Will hung-up his mobile before Jack could direct his mind too much towards work. The dream from the night before was hidden behind everything that had happened afterwards. He

didn't need anyone to shatter the beautiful morning, even if Will wasn't sure what to do with one that didn't start with terror induced nausea.

"Wazzat your boss?"

Will looked down at his lap, at the man who was now looking up with eyes half-lidded from sleep.

"Yeah. I was just calling in sick."

"Playing hooky?"

Will smiled at the out-of-date term and relaxed back against the wall. Steve squinted up at him, the sun through the window shining directly in his eyes, but his smile mirrored the light.

The blond rolled over from his back so that he could kiss the skin that was closest to him, which was just above Will's hip next to the soft trail of hair that ran down from his belly button. He looked as comfortable as Will felt, and the dark-haired man hoped that Steve knew just how happy he was making the one above him.

Will took a moment to scratch Peggy behind the ear as he tried to find something to say. He wished that his happiness showed on his face as much as Steve's did on his. The profiler couldn't recall ever seeing himself happy and was unsure as to whether his face could express something as beautiful as he was feeling.

"I... can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

It was an inadequate statement to explain why he was calling in sick; why he needed to be with Steve and his dogs instead of in his own head.

Steve sat up, the dogs having to shuffle out of the way with the sudden shift.

Will barely had time to panic that Steve might be leaving him before warm lips pressed against his. Sweet, despite the morning-breath from both of them, and containing all the emotion that Will had failed to vocalize.

"Would you like some coffee?"

The sudden change of direction once they parted was slightly jarring and Will blinked, confused at what must have prompted the turn. It made him worry for a moment that Steve was looking for an excuse to leave, but the passion still tingled on his lips and he refused to believe that was the case.

"Yeah, sure."

"Great." Steve's face lit up, "I'll bring it up to you here. How do you like it?"

Will told him his coffee preferences as he reached over to slip on his glasses, so that he could clearly see the other man's form as he rose from the sheets. He had a smattering of freckles

across his shoulder blades and some scars on his side that Will could vaguely remember running his hands across the night before. He was beautiful.

Steve pulled on the loose pyjama pants that had been discarded in the dark, and let them hang low and untied on his hips as he left the room.

The image lingered in his head for a moment before he shook it off and pushed himself out of the bed. He headed towards the bathroom, where he relieved himself and chanced a glance at himself in the mirror.

His hair was scruffier than usual, which he didn't mind overly as it was an achievement in itself, but his eyes were brighter and his skin more coloured than he remembered them being. He ran his tongue over his teeth and made a desperate grab for his toothbrush, feeling strange about having a reason to brush his teeth before his morning coffee.

He debated running an electric razor over his beard, just to even it out, but worried that it might look like he was trying too hard and settled for simply deodorizing before be headed back into the bedroom.

Will didn't know if he should get dressed, head back into the bed or both. The dogs were still enjoying the mattress in his absence, and the profiler watched them for a moment while trying to figure out that he was doing.

"Hey." Came the soft Brooklyn accent behind him. "Are you okay?"

"I just, ummm, went to the bathroom... and got confused about what I was supposed to do next." As he stepped aside to allow Steve back into the bedroom, he realized just how stupid he sounded and wished he could hide back in the bathroom.

However, Steve didn't say anything about it, but placed one steaming mug of coffee on Will's side of the bed and made himself comfortable on the other, tucking his legs under one of the dogs who shuffled a little to accommodate him.

"Is there anything you wanted to do today?" Steve asked as he settled next to Will.

"Not particularly. I'm really just happy to stay here."

Will smiled and took a mouthful of coffee. It was slightly too sweet, but he savoured the heat of it before he set the mug aside. He looked back over at Steve, who had brought in a sketch pad from under his arm and had flipped it open.

"Is that me?"

"Yeah." Steve blushed slightly, but didn't attempt to move the paper away from Will's gaze. "I started it in New York, but I thought I'd try and finish it now. You look... different this morning and I wanted to see if I could..." He gestured to the pad with a pencil, "Capture it, in case it disappeared."

Kissing the curve of Steve's shoulder, Will hoped that whatever Steve could see in him wouldn't fade. He knew that the spontaneous decision to call in sick would only work for a

day before his history would make people worry, but he was going to try and put everything aside and give Steve the morning that he deserved.

Will was tired of having to deal with his problems and, although Steve claimed being more than happy to support Will, he didn't want to put any more on Steve. He was more than happy to be someone else's support for a change, and he could be or do anything Steve needed. It was nice to be needed for something he wanted to do.

He rested his lips against Steve's shoulder again, feeling the muscles contract as they adjusted the paper to a different angle.

"I'm afraid I'm not a very good muse."

"From what I've heard you inspire a lot of people." He paused to smile over to the man at his side. "I thought I made it clear last night what you inspire in me."

Will thought of the obsessive attention that had been lavished on him by Hannibal, as well as the countless articles that had been published by Freddy Lounds with his name starring in the headline, and agreed.

"You did."

He stalled for a moment, unsure, and withdrew from Steve. He had been reluctant to voice what he'd been feeling, but he had the sudden urge to risk it, to make sure Steve knew how much Will appreciated him. Even if it did jinx what was between them, as he had feared before, at least he would always have enough memories to know that he could have something more in his life than just dead bodies.

"I know I'm not *good* at... being happy... but, you know I am, right?"

The sketchbook drooped as it lost all of Steve's attention.

"Of course. I wouldn't have," he sighed and set the pad aside. "I wouldn't have let last night happen if I didn't think you were happy. Even after whatever it was that woke you up. I want you to be comfortable with me, Will. You make me feel special," he frowned slightly, "but in a normal way and I love... I love it."

Will blinked at the sudden end to Steve's train of thought, but set it aside as the other clearly wanted to do.

"I am comfortable. With you. I wouldn't have wanted last night if I didn't."

"Was it..." Steve looked away, back down at his sketchbook. He touched the edge of the pad with a since of wistfulness. "Was it good? I've never been with another man before and I really enjoyed it, but I don't know if..." he made a vague gesture.

He looked so unsure of himself, and Will was once again struck by how young Steve must have been. Despite the shadow in his eyes and the calm wisdom, he couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

Will remembered how he felt when he was that young; not knowing who he was, but thinking that he should have an idea by that point and unsure if anything he was doing was a the right move.

Starting with the shoulder, again, Will started to kiss his way up Steve's neck, enjoying the rough stubble against his lips until he arrived at an ear.

"Yes," he breathed, "It was perfect."

Steve turned his head and Will immediately captured his lips, reaching around to easily move the sketchpad out of harm's way as the two leant back. Will sprawled himself over Steve's chest, finding it harder but much more preferable to the mattress, and let his hand drift down to feel the other man through the pyjama pants.

"Wait."

"What? What's wrong?"

"I don't..." Steve flushed, and Will got a full view of just how much of his body the embarrassed colour covered. "I don't want the dogs to see."

Laughter filtered through him and he let his full weight lean on Steve, burying his head into the artist's neck as he chuckled.

"I'll put their breakfast out in the kitchen, they won't bother us." He managed pull himself away from the other and off the bed, "Don't move."

They'd stayed in the bedroom until they had no more energy to spend and had to venture down for lunch. As it was their first meal of the day Steve had practically inhaled the contents of Will's fridge as he promptly promised to restock it. Will wasn't going to hold him to his word, as the simple but huge omelette the younger man had made more than made up for the need to go food shopping.

Steve stood at the bench while Will sat on one of his stools. They were happy to eat in silence opposite each other while Will enjoyed the view and food more than he thought possible. He had forgotten what the afterglow was like, but he'd didn't recall it ever feeling so complete.

"We should take the dogs to the park." Steve suggested between mouthfuls, "I don't think they've been out for a while, have they?"

"Errr. No, t-they haven't." Something in him sunk. He had always thought himself a good dog owner, as it was a gift that he was actually proud of. "I've had appointments, for the MRI and with Doctor Lecter, and I've been working again so I haven't had time-"

Steve reached across and rested a hand on Will's. "No, it's fine. I understand, I just thought it would be nice for us to get out too. I want to see you in the sun."

Will smiled, despite his worry, as he understood why Steve wanted them both to get out of the house.

"It's okay, you know. Us. We're okay. Whatever we are, it's not going to change because we slept with each other. Well, it will, but not in a bad way." He felt himself blush slightly, but managed to keep his eyes on Steve to try and convey what he wasn't able to find the words for.

He didn't know much about the nineteen-forties and the conventions, but it was clear that Steve was unsure what was supposed to happen with a relationship after sex. There wasn't any regret or reservations in his gaze about what had happened, but he didn't seem to be able to reconcile their physical connection to the emotional one.

He was aware that Steve hadn't had a relationship that had progressed as far as theirs. Human Peggy was most likely the most experience the young man had, and his ideas about sex were most likely reserved to married couples and quick encounters only serving to satisfy the physical urges.

Asking to go out to walk the dogs was to reaffirm that they still had a relationship on the same footing as the day before, that there were no shifts of power or insuring something emotional hadn't been closed off.

"Sorry," Steve ducked his head, "I've just I've only ever... with the chorus girls. And they were lovely, but it didn't feel like this. I wasn't sure..."

"It's fine." He echoed Steve's earlier reassurance, "But you should know that there's nothing wrong with wanting to just stay in and stay in bed with each other. It won't compromise anything else between us."

"Thank you." His shoulders relaxed, "I don't know why I was worried about it, but thank you."

"Even if you don't understand it, it is. Understandable, I mean."

Steve smiled and took another mouthful of left-over Chinese.

"How come..." Will frowned suddenly. "Why did you have condoms in your travel bag?"

"Those were a gift from a friend. Tony. He was joking when he gave them to me, and he'll probably think I'm joking when I tell him I used them."

"Well, he's a very... *intuitive* friend, regardless."

Will didn't hear the knocking on the door until he emerged from the laundry, after changing the bed and putting dog-covered sheets into the wash. The large house wasn't exactly soundproofed, but the washing machine was old and loud. He wondered how long they had

been standing there rapping on the wood, and who it could have been to not decide to turn away.

"Oh!"

"Hello, Will."

"I wasn't expecting you."

Will hesitated to step aside and let Doctor Lecter in. Steve was in the shower and Will was looking forward to when he got out so the two of them could lie on fresh sheets. He didn't want Hannibal to come in and upset the balance that had fallen over the house.

He knew that the psychiatrist was probably there to see how the hypnosis was going, if something had resurfaced in his dreams. Will, however, really didn't want to destroy the day he was having by thinking about anything other than how it felt to be with Steve. He didn't need to recall being murdered by his new lover's hand while the man was upstairs.

"I apologize for the surprise, but I heard you were ill and was concerned."

"There's no need to be worried. I-It's just a cold, and I've taken something for it, so I'm just going to go back to sleep."

"Have you eaten?"

Will glanced down and noticed that the man was carrying a bag with several Tupperware containers in it. He felt his heart sink down into his stomach to settle with the eggs that Steve had made him, as all hope of turning Hannibal away left.

Hannibal by himself was easy to sidestep, but to turn away Hannibal bringing food would be unheard of and highly suspicious.

"I have had something to eat." He tried not to be insulted by the sceptical expression that flittered across the doctor's face. He was capable of taking care of himself. "B-But I probably won't be up to making anything later so..."

Will shrugged, expecting Hannibal to pick up on him not wanting company and come back later on in the day, or the next if he could stretch his lie. He needed time to brace himself, to figure out how to not give himself away and to get Steve out of Hannibal's path.

He didn't want the doctor to start laying doubt in the mind of the soldier. Steve knew about Will, and had accepted him, but he couldn't imagine anything good coming from the two meeting, though he wasn't entirely sure why.

"Then I shall put these in your refrigerator. Although I will have to write instructions on how they are to be reheated. One cannot simple throw this," he lifted the bag slightly in indication, "in the microwave and hope for the best. May I?..."

Will managed to not wince. "Err... Yeah. Sure."

Hannibal crossed the threshold and made his way towards the kitchen with the same confidence he possessed in his own house. Will closed the door and followed the psychiatrist into the kitchen, where only an hour or so before he had been sitting with Steve.

He looked back at the opening to the staircase, hoping Steve would take his time in the shower and that he had the presence of mind to put on more than just a towel once he decided to come find Will.

"You're looking remarkably well, Will. Do you, perhaps, have someone looking after you?"

Whipping his gaze back around to Hannibal, Will almost choked. The psychiatrist was eyeing off the plates that were piled next to the sink ready to be washed. There were clearly more fresh dirty dishes there than there should be. Given how much Steve had eaten, the presence of another person in the house was obvious.

"Peggy's owner. Steve." He looked from the dishes to the single and unoccupied stool. "He came around this morning to walk Peggy. He's in the shower at the moment. She tripped him in the mud and I said he could use it before he goes."

Hannibal took the stool. "Tell me about him."

Will felt the ice crack beneath him.

"Steve's... been coming around a lot. He's become a friend. He... Err... Knows about... Me. Everything that happened. He... still wants to be my friend, despite that."

Hannibal didn't give anything away on his face, except for a slight crinkling around the corners of his mouth that Will couldn't interpret it. He had noticed that the old farmhouse plumbing had stopped croaking, and he shifted on his feet as he waited for the inevitable.

"And you return his friendship?"

Will wasn't in a position to really turn anyone's 'friendship' away, and felt somewhat affronted that Hannibal thought he would.

"Yes, I do."

The doctor was about to say something further, but seemed to decide against it with the sound of footfalls and several dogs tumbling down the stairs. He rose and re-buttoned his jacket in anticipation while Will decided to bail and bury his head in the fridge under the pretence of searching for something.

"Good Afternoon. I'm Doctor Hannibal Lecter."

"Captain Steve Rogers. It's a pleasure."

Will heard them clasping hands and let out a shaky breath as he spun.

"Beer?" He passed a bottle over to Steve, which was accepted with a worried flicker before Will turned to Hannibal. "I only have beer, and scotch, but no wine, Sorry."

Hannibal smiled mildly before pulling a bottle from the bag he had brought. "I suspected as much."

"Ah... Good. I think I have wine glasses."

He turned away, his hands shaking slightly as he opened a cupboard to search.

"Will has talked about you in our sessions, Steven, but he didn't mention you being military."

"I'm in the army. Though it's mostly training and recruiting, I haven't seen active service for a while."

"Shall we?"

Will turned to see Hannibal gesturing to the lounge and Steve giving him a smile that was polite and warm. It didn't contain any of the light that Will was used to seeing, but for one who had never seen how amazing Steve's smile could be, it would easily have fooled most. It worried Will that Hannibal was not the same as most people.

He grabbed several more bottles of beer in one hand and Doctor Lecter's glass in the other.

Steve and Hannibal were sitting on opposite couches, and Will didn't hesitate to sit beside Steve. It was a quick decision, to try and create a united front with Steve, hoping that Steve would keep him strong. It unwittingly placed himself in the same position he adopted during his sessions with Hannibal, and when he looked across the lounge he almost regretted the decision.

However, he had never seated himself beside Hannibal unless they were opposite Jack.

He wanted to put his hand on Steve's leg, to reaffirm the tangible connection he had to the soldier, but knew that neither of them would find it appropriate enough for it to provide the comfort Will needed.

"So, I can tell from your accent you're from Brooklyn, I assume you live here for the military base?"

"I bunk on the base here sometimes," Steve explained lightly, "My actual apartment is in New York, I do some consulting work over there."

Hannibal tipped his head in a nod.

Will realized that Steve was starting to relax in the presence of someone who wasn't recognizing him as Captain America. He couldn't warn Steve about Hannibal because he wasn't sure why he felt so adamant that the psychiatrist could not be trusted. He hadn't tried to articulate to anyone exactly what strange and unremembered feelings were making him hesitant and he was sure no one would understand.

Yet he had allowed Hannibal into his head, to try and sort through Will's relationship with his work. He'd felt desperate after finding out that Steve might be inhibiting his abilities he wanted to make sure he could find a way to have both.

It seemed to have worked.

Although the dreams had been odd in perspective, he felt like everything was there that he needed to figure out the case. The presence of Steve as the killer hadn't hindered that, but it did make him want to stall any further assessment of the dream as he didn't want to indulge that image of his lover.

"Will?"

The side of Steve's hand brushed against his and it startled him to look into concerned blue eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, sorry. I was... err..."

"Off with the fairies?" Hannibal suggested.

Will tensed in Hannibal's direction. It was clear from the pointedly un-sarcastic tone that he knew exactly what Will had been thinking of.

"Did something disrupt your sleep last night? A nightmare perhaps?"

Will looked at the opposing man's tie as he wondering how much he could and should say. Trying to hide any more from Hannibal would most likely make it seem as if there was protecting something larger, which Will was sure that there was within his feelings for Steve. He just wasn't sure if he could verbalize them yet and he was willing to sacrifice himself up to Hannibal's scrutiny in order to protect whatever it was.

So he nodded. "About the case, yes."

Hannibal tilted his head. "I was concerned when I heard you were unwell. I had thought, perhaps, our last session had prompted some negative side effects." He paused, and did not quite glance over at Steve. "My apologies, Will. This has the potential to break doctor-patient privilege. I understand if you do not want to continue the conversation here."

Will shook his head, not wanting to paint himself into a corner of Hannibal's office. "It's fine," he started to feel a little bit panicked and indecisive, "S-Steve knows everything about what I do and... how. It's fine."

He looked down at his knees as he rested his elbows on them. Surely, as perceptive as Hannibal was, he shouldn't be able to know about the blackened creature that had first acted as his killer, and the subsequent presence of Steve. He felt confident that the particular imagery of his nightmare wouldn't be revealed to Steve, but it was the tiniest shred of confidence that was tenuous at best.

"It's helped," he reassured Hannibal, "I can see the killer... he's a lot clearer now."

"See, but not feel?"

"No I... I-I wasn't the killer. The killer was no one."

Steve's hand rested on Will's shoulder and he looked up at the show of concern. He had told Steve about his difficulties letting go of his own identity in order to help solve the case. He hadn't told him about Hannibal's theory that his impediment was due to being too happy and comfortable with himself.

He shouldn't have to feel guilty about being happy, and Steve shouldn't have to feel guilty for making him feel that way.

"What did he look like," Steve asked softly, "if you saw him as someone else?"

Will would have kicked Steve if Hannibal wasn't there to witness it. He had underestimated Steve's perceptiveness, as it was clear that the soldier knew that he was holding something back.

"He wasn't really recognizable." Will tried to convey how truthful that was.

"Who might you have been in this dreamscape, Will, to give you such perspective without your usual empathy?"

"I was..." he didn't quite look over at Hannibal. "He was killing me. I couldn't feel him because I was feeling..."

"The victim." Hannibal finished what Will didn't want to say or hear.

"Yes." Will bit through his teeth.

"Do you feel victimized, Will?"

He felt his eyebrows rise at the psychologist and he answered in a low and horribly controlled voice. "*What do you think*?"

Hannibal tilted his head back and regarded Will with a look that seemed to warn Will not to push much further. The profiler knew he was being rude, and that Hannibal wasn't appreciative of his tone, but it had been a particularly obvious question that Will knew was designed to pry somewhere that was still too easily damaged.

It was to make him crumble in front of Steve.

He would have considered leaving the room if Steve hadn't been there, but instead he lowered his head, closed his eyes and grit out a shaky apology.

"You don't have to do that, Will." Steve's hand rested on his arm, his tone soft, firm. "Doctor Lecter, I don't know what you hope to get from this inquiry. I may not have seen what happened, but I think Will has every right to feel *unjustly* victimized."

Levelling his eyes at Steve's chest, Will just nodded and swallowed back another apology.

He was doing exactly what Hannibal wanted, and he was willing to bet that Steve was doing the same. They had probably just confirmed any suspicions Hannibal may have had about their relationship, but Will suddenly felt a strange space in him where he didn't care what Hannibal thought about them.

Steve may not think of himself as strong, but he was, and he was untouchable.

Even if Hannibal managed to twist Steve against him and put a stop to their relationship, Steve would be there as a friend because he cared too much about Will already.

Somehow, that was more terrifying than Hannibal.

Hannibal, Will decided, he could deal with.

Hannibal had penned his re-heating instructions and left them magnetized to the fridge. It specifically forbid him from using the microwave, and Will suspected that breaking that rule would somehow seal his fate with Hannibal.

As soon as the psychiatrist had left Will had jumped into the shower while Steve had taken the dogs for a walk. He had been neglecting them, but hadn't told Steve it was because he had been waiting for him to call and was worried about losing reception if he strayed too far from the house. Being alone in the house was what Will felt he needed, though he didn't voice that either.

Will lent his forehead against the slower wall and closed his eyes under the heat.

He didn't know what had happened in the room with Hannibal and Steve. He had been so conflicted about Steve and Hannibal meeting, worried about Hannibal poisoning Steve that he hadn't taken the very nature of Steve into account.

Perhaps he had just been scared about what Hannibal could dig up between Steve and Will.

While he had found comfort in Steve's strength and how he *somehow* wanted to be with Will, being in the same space as the two strong, polarized men them had shifted something in that perspective.

He didn't exactly know how, but it had.

Steve inspired something ineffable in Will, something that made him feel connected in a way that had nothing to do with his empathetic tendances. He wanted to keep those feelings, and the man who inspired them, close, but he realized that did not want the same returned.

If something were to happen to him, if he was to get too close to a case again, or if a killer had gone after him, or god forbid, Freddy Lounds, then Steve would get hurt.

However, it would be *him* that would hurt the beautiful soldier, not Hannibal.

It would only ever be him.

Although Steve hadn't said much else about his work worries, Will knew that it would be an important decision. It was probably forcing the man to think about his place in this century and how he wanted to adapt. He had definitely gotten the impression that Steve was unfulfilled by the job that he had at the army base, but was worried that now he might be too influential a factor.

He couldn't have Steve give up something that would make him fit into the world in a manner Will didn't, just because of him.

Will turned the water off, his head still against the tiles as he looked down at the tub floor.

He sighed softly before grabbing a towel. He used it to scrub his head as he tried to turn off his brain and wondered whether it would be inappropriate of him to have something stronger to drink that afternoon.

Probably not, he decided, but he may have to go out for more beer.

"Will?"

"Huh?"

The man blinked at the polite knocking at the door. He hadn't realized that he had been in the shower long enough for Steve to return from his run with the dogs.

Will pulled the towel down around his shoulders and fetched another to go around his waist before he opened the door. Steve looked happy and relaxed with his t-shirt sticking to him from sweat and his hair mussed.

"I think I lost track of time." Will apologised and gave him a light kiss, "I appreciate you doing that for me... and I know the dogs do too."

"They've all collapsed downstairs; they're not used to keeping up my pace... are you okay though?"

Sighing, Will turned from Steve to pick up his clothes. "I don't know. I used to feel clearer after I talked to Hannibal, but not anymore." He pulled on a shirt, "Maybe I'm just not ready to be comfortable with him yet."

"You were comfortable enough to let his hypnotize you; that counts for something."

Will shrugged and hesitated to continue getting dressed in front of the other man. Perhaps it was because Hannibal's visit had made him feel particularly vulnerable, as it seemed oddly more intimate in the tiny bathroom with the other fully clothed than it had been when the two of them had been naked. He could feel himself flush and hesitated at folds of his towels.

Steve seemed not to have noticed, but he picked at his shirt and sniffed at the material. "Probably not the best idea to have a shower before going for a run. I get changed and I'll meet you in the lounge room."

He looked up and gave Will an understanding smile before he disappeared.

Beer in hand, Will rested his head on Steve's shoulder with his body sprawled along the other man's side. They hadn't spoken since he had dressed and the two of them had sat on the couch. Steve seemed to understand that Hannibal had inspired something complicated in him that was too difficult to be expressed in words, but wanted to keep in contact with Will.

It was nice.

"Can we talk about you and about you maybe moving to New York?"

"If you want. What do you want to know?"

"I assume you'll be working with this Shield, but what will you be doing there?"

Steve's grip loosened slightly. "I'm sorry, Will, but it's classified."

"Right... Right, but it's something better than what you do at the military base. Something more fulfilling?"

"It's possible," The man shifted to sit up against the arm of the couch, forcing Will up off his shoulder and into a position where Steve's thoughtful look was visible. "What's this about? Do you want me to go?"

"No. No, I don't." He spoke truthfully, "but I don't want our... *relationship* to be that big of a factor. I don't want you to stay for me."

"Will, it's an important factor, but it won't be for you. It'll be for me. Maybe a better question would be 'do you want me to stay?'"

Will sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, trying to find the most appropriate words. "I want... I want you to choose whichever path you're not going to regret later."

"I'm not going to regret this, even if it somehow ends badly," Steve responded, seeming to know where Will's mind was, even though the man himself wasn't sure. "I *will* regret not giving it the chance it deserves, and I think it deserve a chance. I think *we* deserve a chance."

Will hesitated before nodding. Steve probably had enough people telling him who and where he needed to be that Will shouldn't add his voice to that. He supposed that the relationship could continue as it was, and Steve could make the decision when the time came.

"Does that help?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "a bit."

"Then what's wrong, what brought this on?"

Will shook his head. "I just... It threw me off seeing you with Hannibal." He looked away, regretting the words before he spoke them. "It made me realize that you don't fit with my world. You're too... solid."

The concept was hard to explain, and from the moment of silence he knew that Steve didn't quite understand either. It didn't matter so much to Will whether he did or not, as long as he knew it was something of importance to Will.

Steve wrung his hands and looked at his bare toes, which, Will noticed, seemed to wiggle with thought, "Can't you make a world I fit into? A separate world from that one?"

"It doesn't really work that way, Steve. I've never been able to... 'separate' myself from it."

"Then couldn't it be a good thing that I'm separate from all that?"

Will buried his face in his hands. Yes, it was a good thing. Unequivocally a good thing.

He remembered the dream, and how he had woke confused but had been unafraid because of Steve's presence. The soldier was so far removed from his life, that the idea that Steve in flesh and in his dreamscape could be in anyway related was absurd. The reality of Steve's heart had created a buffer that prevented the doubts and horror from the nightmare to bleed into his waking mind.

"You... I want you to be different... Different to me and everything, not different to how you are... You make me feel like a different person, one who's not... haunted."

Frowning, Will realized he wasn't being very articulate, given the complexity of what he was and wasn't trying to say. Although his head was still downcast, he looked up through his eye lashed at Steve, who looked a little lost, but as if he thought he could almost grasp what was going on.

"The dreams," he confessed, "where I'm the victim. The killer was you. He had your face."

He could feel the other man shift beside him, swinging around to sit more upright and planting his feet firmly on the ground.

"Last night." The Brooklyn tone came out flat. "Last night you said you had a nightmare and then we... I asked if you were okay when you hesitated, and you said you were."

"I was." Will reached out to touch Steve, but his hand settled on the couch between them instead. "I really was. He, *it*, looked like you, but it wasn't you. I lose who I am, I forget whether I'm me or... but you are always *you*. Strong and soft and honest. You will always just be you, and I don't think I could ever confuse that with anything else. You're separate, but I'm... blurry, and I'm afraid to cling to you... in case you become blurry too."

This time he did touch Steve.

"Do you understand that? Do you believe me?"

The young man shook his head, "I don't understand a lot about this, and I'm not sure whether you understand either, but I know it's important to you. I just don't know whether it's important for me to fit, or be separate. I don't know what you want, Will. Do you?"

"I want you. Beyond that, I have no idea."

"Then what are you afraid of."

"Hannibal." The word flung from his mouth on instinct, his throat closing around it as it was expelled. "I'm not entirely sure why, but I don't want him in my life while you're around... It sounds like a misguided attempt at possession, but I don't want him near you."

"Okay," Steve mumbled, sounding anything but.

When Will spoke, he voice shook with restrained emotion. "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't make any sense."

"I don't think it matters. If there's something making you uncomfortable or conflicted then maybe we need to figure out where we are before we... decide anything."

Not feeling as if he could talk, Will simply nodded.

It was, technically, what he had been thinking about. He wanted Steve to be somewhere he belonged and could live instead of hide away from people like fuzzy-haired reporters and strange psychiatrists. Steve was too vibrant and beautiful to be caught up in his dark world, one that could damage Steve's gentle honesty and ultimately end up hurting him.

"We could dial it back a little. Maybe have that date that we didn't get to?"

"Maybe." Will's voice croaked. "Maybe... ummm... We could do something a little more relaxed. W-With less pressure?"

"A dinner with friends? Natasha and Clint are the only people I know in town, really, and you already met them so hopefully you'll, be comfortable with that. We can see if our worlds... fit?"

"Yeah," he muttered, "Yeah I-I think I can find someone. Probably."

"Alright... Alright, good." Steve stood from the couch, running a hand through his hair to push it aside into his usual style. "I'm going to grab my suitcase and head back to the barracks, but I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Yes, okay." Will rose to match the other man, despite the standing height difference. He could remember how happy they had been that morning, but recall the conversation they'd had in the kitchen before Hannibal had come over. "Look, Steve, before you go... This isn't happening because we had sex. It didn't cause this... It's because... I think I love you, and I'm... me."

Steve looked and him a moment, his face inscrutable, but he swallowed visibly and nodded.

"Thank you."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> So this is the last chapter. I was holding off on posting it because I wasn't happy with the ending and wanted to have an epilogue posted at the same time. I'm still not happy with the ending, and I don't have an epilogue to save face with, but I thought I'd been stalling long enough and just had to resign myself. Hopefully I will have time towards the end of the year to write an extra, small chapter, but it's best to assume I won't.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will felt he had been called to the principal's for not having a sick note. Even though he doubted Hannibal had tattled on him, the profiler had the distinct impression that the Jack knew that Will had blown off work the day before.

As he sat in the office, he hoped that the other man would be perceptive enough to not overly chastise him. He tried to keep the dejectedness off his face, not wanting too many questions asked about his day off, but he hoped the hangover pounding in the back of his skull was visible enough for Jack to know that he had paid for his deception.

In the very least, Will had something to distract Jack, as he had forced himself to think about the case. It had been a desperate attempt to ignore how much he liked Steve so that he could prepare himself for the worst through detachment.

He'd Imagined Steve killing him over and over and it hadn't particularly hindered his feelings for the strong man. It had, aided by Will's remaining scotch, helped numb the guilt and pain that had gripped him, and he'd been able to curl up on bed, running through the dream so much that he hadn't been able to sleep.

It was a small mercy, for as terrible as he felt that morning, hungover and tired, he had at least avoided whatever else his unconscious wanted to throw at him.

"Are you sure?" Jack asked as he looked up from the barely coherent scribbling that covered Will's copy of the case file.

"Yes. The girl drowning in his blood was an accident."

"And a failed medical student?"

"Well... Maybe not failed," Will conceded, "but he didn't finish med school. He could have, but didn't. He... He needed to learn how to perform surgery so that he could partially lift the heart out of the chest without killing the person... He needs to see the heart stop beating... And he needs to know that he's the reason why."

He trailed off, swallowing a sour taste as he remembered the contorted planes of Steve's face.

"Thank you, Will." Jack said as he filed the vandalized file away to the side. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Will nodded, not entirely sure what Jack was referring too, but not wanting clarification. He looked at the papers scattering the desk, knowing almost instinctively that one of them would be handed off to him. Thankfully, the bigger man didn't seem to want to give him another case just yet. Perhaps having learnt from the past, he seemed to be handling Will gently and didn't want to overload him.

"I was expecting you to take two days off; Alana's taking your classes today."

"I... stayed in bed most of the day, and I... felt better. And this is important," he gestured to the file, "I thought I should get it to you as soon as possible."

Jack leant forward in his chair and spoke clearly, "Will, you should be at home. Taking care of yourself is the priority now and you need to allow yourself time to recharge."

Will, again, nodded. Although he wondered whether what Jack was saying came out of concern, fear, or Hannibal's influence. It was possible that it had been prompted by Alana, as she was the one most likely to baby him, but he liked to think that, after their talk, she would allow him the space to learn how to baby himself.

"I'd like to work on the case a little more, maybe see the body. I might be able to get something more for you, or confirm what I got from the file."

"Only if you're up to it, *and* you go home straight after."

"I promise."

At Jack's nod, Will tried not to spring from the chair too fast. He slung his satchel over his shoulder and went for the door, intent on seeing a murdered body and no chatty colleagues along the way.

Keeping his head down as he walked, Will tracked the familiar route to the morgue. He didn't know what he wanted to see in the bodies there, but somehow he didn't think it would necessarily relate to the case. Perhaps, he just wanted reassurance that he hadn't committed himself to being the victim so much so that the he could see himself in the draws.

He paused outside the door, hearing a heated argument regarding which movie best portrayed an accurate future, and shook his head slightly. After so many heavy, stilted conversations, having such a frivolous one, even amongst friends, seemed so alien.

Will pushed open the doors, interrupting the debate as he turned into the room and saw Price and Zeller on opposing sides of a metal bed, a cut and killed woman between them.

Although he two men had often been accused of being inappropriate and disrespectful, Will knew that it was not the case and respected their ability to bring the mundane and the

palatable into their work to compartmentalise what they did. It was an enviable method that Will knew he would never be able to do himself.

"Hello," he greeted, causing them both to look up in slight shock that he'd greeted them so cordially when he usually ignored their banter in favour of the bodies.

"Hey, Will. What's up?"

"Just thought I'd..." he gestured to the woman between them, "take a look."

The two scientists looked at each other. They weren't vocalizing anything, but from the strange expressions that crossed Price's face and the furrowed brows of Zeller it would have been obvious to even the least perceptive person that they were speaking to each other.

"Sure," came the eventual answer from Price as he moved aside.

Will couldn't tell who had lost their argument, as they both seemed to have conceded something in allowing him to approach the body. He suspected that they both weren't quite sure how to deal with him since he'd been released, as they had been the ones to confirm the evidence against him, and Will hadn't really made an effort to let them know how he was with the whole thing.

Even before they had been accused him of murder, he'd never really been... friendly with them.

He realised that had It had been unfair of him to accuse Steve of not fitting in with his world when Will didn't even fit.

"H-How have you guys been going? Good?"

"Yeah," Zeller started, carefully, "We're alright, but there's nothing new on her."

"And nothing we can use to ID whoever did this."

Will nodded. "I'm sorry to hear it," he looked at the woman open on the bench, took a breath to steady himself and corrected breathily, "but actually I was asking about you both. Not work."

"Oh. Ummm... We're good!"

"Thank you for asking."

"Okay..." Will relaxed slightly, the conversation was going well. "That's good then."

"And yourself?"

"Yeah, we heard you were down with the flu."

Huffing a laugh, Will adjusted his glasses and gave them as much of a smile as he could manage. "Nothing nearly that dramatic." He took a few steps toward the victim on the table,

close enough to see his reflection in her face. "Can you tell me about what you think happened?"

"Haven't you read the file?"

"Yeah," Will shrugged, removed his glasses and squinted down at the woman, "but I want to hear it from you guys."

Will walked out of the morgue feeling as if he had accomplished more than he'd intended, even though he'd had no idea what he'd wanted to achieve when he'd entered.

It was possibly the least confused he had ever been walking away from a dead body.

He had been worried that perhaps he had been so affected by his position as 'the victim' that he would be unable to see anything but himself in the corpse. Looking down at her, he hadn't known what he would see; whether he would be her killer or whether she would have his face... or both, as he wouldn't put it past himself.

He hadn't.

Perhaps it had been because, after talking with the two men in the lab, he felt as if he'd put something to rest and Will made a note to talk to them in a more friendly way more often.

Maybe he could have a healthier relationship with Steve if the kind soldier was not the only stable, human presence in his life.

"Oooff."

Will tumbled backwards. He'd been searching in his bag for the bottle of water he'd bought and stashed there, needing it to dull the hangover's headache, but had collided with someone while his head had been down. He landed heavily on the ground as a few things spilled out of the bag, including the plastic bottle he had been making a grab for.

A pair of heals appeared in his vision, and their owner picked up his water bottle before he could recover.

"Should watch where you're going."

"Yeah, sorry."

He accepted Beverly's hand and allowed her to pull him to his feet.

"Glad to see you're staying hydrated," she pointedly didn't smirk, "since you're not feeling well."

"Yes, well... Yeah." Will accepted the water bottle back, giving her a sheepish smile as he unscrewed the top and took a mouthful. As he lowered and swallowed, he gave the smirk that

she wouldn't. "The beer and scotch probably didn't help."

She chuckled, "no doubt."

Will looked up at her, appreciating the deliberately muted concern. He knew that she had worried about him when he had been gaoled, but after being released there hadn't been any sort of tension; she hadn't babied him or tried to avoid him.

It was nice.

"Beverly, are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

She blinked and frowned slightly. "Nothing," she explained, "do you want to do something?"

The confusion and surprise in her voice was tapered, but noticeable.

"I'm having dinner with a friend, but we're both supposed to bring someone so it isn't... so it's more casual." He shrugged, trying to hide not only how much the dinner meant, but also the significance of him asking her.

She was, he knew, the closest thing he had to a friend. Will wasn't sure he had any *close* friends besides, perhaps, Steve, but Beverly's friendship had been consistent before and after he'd been accused of murder, which he was very thankful for.

Although he wanted her to know how much he appreciated it, Will didn't want to seem desperate to try and replace Hannibal's companionship.

"...'So it isn't' what?" she asked with a half-smile, as if she already knew.

Will steeled himself, deciding that if anyone wouldn't make fun of him for what he was feeling, it would be Beverly.

"So it wouldn't be as if he and I were on a date."

She tilted her head and took in his face for a moment. For someone who analysed crime scenes she seemed to do an excellent job with people too.

"Which of you didn't want it to be a date; you or him?"

Will gave a bitter huff of a laugh. "Both and neither... I think..." he looked down at the ground, his head throbbing as his throat and chest seemed to close as he voiced something he didn't particularly want to admit, "I think I've screw it up."

Beverly shook her head, gripping at Will's arm in an effort to console him without being overbearing.

"So for this dinner, do you want me to be your wingman? Try and talk you up for this guy?"

"I want you to be you... and maybe try to fill in any awkward silences."

"I can do that." She moved past him and towards the lab, calling over her should "but before dinner, you have to tell me *all* about him."

They had all come to the agreement that dinner at a restaurant, as Steve and Will had attempted previously, would be slightly too awkward and had instead decided on an upscale bar. Will had arrived earlier with Beverly so that he could relax into the surroundings before the other arrived.

The two of them had seated themselves at the booked table with a beer and Will had started to explain how he had met Peggy and then Steve. He didn't go into the harder parts of it and was keeping it fairly simple in regards to them getting to know each other and Steve accepting Will's convoluted past. It seemed like such an ordinary story that he worried it was boring Beverly.

However, she seemed to be interested. She had asked questions about Peggy and Steve, whether she was well behaved, what Steve looked like and whether Will had met any of his friends.

She also seemed genuinely excited for him to have met someone, which convinced Will that he had asked the best person to come to dinner with him.

"You hadn't told Hannibal?" she intersected his story, not surprise in her voice as much as curiosity.

"No. I didn't want..." Will frowned, "I was having trouble with the case, and I was worried that maybe Hannibal would say it was a bad idea to be with anyone so soon after getting out."

"Why would it matter if he did? You didn't like Steve enough to make that decision on your own?"

"I think Steve was the reason I was having trouble getting into the mind of a killer. I couldn't stop being me, I couldn't imagine myself as the killer, because I was too happy being me."

"There's nothing wrong with being happy, Will."

"There is if it means people die."

Beverly shook her head, "Your being happy doesn't cause people to die. It just means you have to catch killers the same way as us mere mortals."

Will shook his head, agreeing to some degree. It was part of his identity and as much as she seemed to understand that, it didn't seem as if she knew how much it meant to him. He supposed that he had fought it so much, almost as much as it fought him, it would be easy for people to misunderstand.

"Maybe."

"After everything that's happened to you, wanting something better doesn't make you selfish." She gave him a soft punch in the arm, "It's about time you put yourself first." Her gaze drifted over his shoulder and she gave a small smile. "Is that him?"

"Errr." Will looked over at the door as she waved Steve and Natasha over. "Yeah, that's Steve"

"*Nice*."

Will ordered an entrée for his main course, as his stomach was in knots trying to figure something to talk about that was banal enough for company but didn't seem as if he was being cold and shutting Steve out.

He had hoped that Steve would be bringing Clint with him, as Will had gotten along with the other man during their limited interactions. He didn't feel comfortable with Natasha, as he couldn't gleam from her practiced facial expressions. It was clear that she had been trained well and from a very young age and Will avoided her gaze from the other side of the table, unsure about how to be around her.

Beverly seemed to be doing most of the talking, telling some of the less grisly stories about her work. She held both Steve and Natasha's attention enough that it wasn't overly important if Will was focusing more on the drinks list than the people at his table.

Although, the profiling consultant had noticed that, while Natasha seemed interested and okay with the topic of crimes scenes and murders, Steve looked concerned and often glanced over at Will, trying to see what the profiler's reaction was to the stories.

However, Will didn't know whether Steve was waiting for Will to contribute to his perspective, or making sure he wouldn't become upset by them.

Or perhaps it was something else entirely as, while Will thought he usually had an accurate read on Steve, he was being particularly reserved at that dinner.

Will worried that it may have been because of the uncertainty of the relationship and the confused state he had been in several days before, rather than anything to do with the dinner and company.

He gently nudged Steve's leg under the table and sent him an inquisitive frown.

Steve smiled slightly and shook his head to tell Will not to worry.

"I want to inspect which vodkas they have before I risk ordering a cocktail," Natasha smiled carefully at Beverly, "Would you like to join me?"

"Sure."

The forensic investigator stood, smoothing her dress down before she stepped away from the table.

Steve had complimented Beverly in it when they had arrived and it had made Will feel slightly embarrassed that he hadn't noticed, even though she didn't seem to mind or read anything into it. He had been so appreciative that she had even come that he hadn't noticed that she had put in the effort for him.

"Will?"

He blinked, and looked away from the two women. "Yeah, sorry, what?"

"I know you don't really like crowds and this kind of thing, but is it okay? Are you okay?"

"I'm... fine." He sounded far more surprised than he'd intended. "A little confused about what we should be doing, but I'm okay, I think. What about you? You looked... like you wanted something from me, but I'm not sure what."

Steve shook his head and smiled slightly. "There's a lot I want from you, Will, but I'll be happy with whatever you're willing to give me." His smile faded slightly, "Why didn't you tell me about the kind of stuff you have to deal with at work?"

"I did."

"You made it sound like people being stabbed or shot, not skin angels and totem poles."

Will winced, but wasn't upset at Beverly for bringing it up at the table. It was true he hadn't gone into details about the kinds of things he did and he knew Steve probably assumed it was less macabre, but he didn't see why this misunderstanding would upset him.

"Why is it important?"

"It's not, I suppose." He picked up his fork and started fiddling with it, "I just feel as if I've not really understood what it is you do. And I encouraged you to go back to it."

"You just stated what I already knew; that I need to help people in order to be myself, even if it means losing sight of who that is for a while." He wanted to touch Steve, maybe to remind him that they could connect as equals instead of being treated like delicate glass then needs to be protected. "Even if you hadn't I would have gone back anyway, I just wouldn't have felt as happy or strong about it.

"It's okay, Steve. It's..."

"A part of you," Steve finished. He smiled, but it was pared back, as if he knew how unsettled that truth made Will. "It's just, it's not something I think I can understand. I thought I could, but this is really different to... anything else."

"That's why they think they need me. Because *I'm* different to everyone else. Because of... that."

Steve looked over at the two women at the bar, "But is it the same now, after the..." he dropped his voice for a moment, "*hypnotism*? Do you connect to it the same way, or is it hindered now, since you have a new perspective?"

Will frowned. He could tell that Steve was struggling on the edge of a concept; trying to figure something out but the realization wasn't coming. The profiler wanted to help, to give Steve clarity, but he didn't know what the other man was searching for and couldn't determine what Steve needed to hear to feel more secure.

"It's a little more difficult. I can see it, but I can't feel it. It's less, but it's better... I don't want to feel it as much as I did before."

Steve studied him for a moment, something flickering in too bright eyes.

"Is it because I'm the killer?" the word sounded flat and hollow, "in your dreams, is that why you don't want to feel?"

"I don't want to feel it because I want to be happy, Steve. That's-" Will hesitated, looking back over at the girls and seeing how far off they were , but also so he wouldn't have to look at the person opposite him. They were rebuffing a man who was hitting on them, so they would probably be returning soon unless they were in a particularly vicious mood.

"That's why I let Hannibal hypnotize me. He- *I* thought that maybe I was too happy being myself with you to feel myself as being the killer. I want to help people, but I don't want to stop being happy, so I'm not going to connect to it the same way I used to. Yes, it's because of you, but not because of the dream."

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but Beverly and Natasha chose that moment to return to the table, cocktails in hand.

"Looks like we're interrupting something serious."

"Do you want us to leave, or have we come back in the nick of time?"

Steve stood and pulled Natasha's chair out for her before she sat down, but didn't answer.

Will nodded and gave a tight almost-smile as Beverly passed over a glass of scotch she had carried over from the bar. She gave him an inquisitive look, wanting him to confirm if he wanted the dinner to continue or not. He gave her a nod and swallowed everything that had been in the neat glass.

'*It's fine*' he mouthed, behind a half-lowered glass.

He knew he would have to talk to Steve after dinner. They had decided to get together to try and play things more casually, but Will suspected he could never really do anything casually, especially not when he felt so strongly about something. Someone.

He was scared about how it might go, but Will realized that Beverly had been right and that it would be okay if his happiness meant he couldn't solve cases with the same efficiency as he

had before. He was still a trained detective, and there was no reason for him to cling to that part of himself when loosening that grip meant he could gain something... *more*.

Will took a breath and resigned himself to the night by asking Natasha how she met Steve.

It was a trite topic, but Will made the decision to just enjoy the dinner for what it was and struggle through the rest of the discussion with Steve later.

Will drove Beverly home, as she claimed to have had too many drinks. She seemed happy and light, but, really, not drunk enough to warrant a chauffeur. The profiler suspected that she wanted to get him alone to talk as they had before Steve and Natasha had arrived, but all Will wanted to do was curl up at home and try to figure out what he'd wanted to get out of the dinner, and whether he'd managed to grasp it.

"Is it bad that I want to eat this now?"

Beverly was staring into the swan of leftovers she had secured.

"We just left." He pointed out.

"Would you judge me if dug in? It might stink up your car."

"Go ahead."

She peeled apart the foil wrapping with a happy noise and dug her fingers into the makeshift bowl. "So, Natasha's a complicated one. What did you think of her?"

"She's guarded," Will explained while keeping his eyes on the darkened road. "I don't know much about her, but I get the feeling she doesn't want me to."

"I like her."

Will shrugged.

"I like *him* too. He's seems very sweet... not at all like someone I'd have pictured you with."

"What? Someone sweet?"

"Someone clean and sunny. I always imagined you with someone more worldly; someone more like Hannibal."

Glancing over at her, Will scoffed and decided that she must have been drunker than he'd initially thought. It was true that he would never have imagined himself with someone as open as Steve, but it was possible that he hadn't seen the point of liking someone like Steve when the possibility of it being neutral was so doubtful.

Beverly was right; the man was clean and sweet. 'Sunny' was a good a word as any to describe Steve. Will was too buried into serial killers and death to come up with an appropriate adjective to accurately reflect what Will thought of the blond.

Steve and Peggy were great friends that had come into Will's life.

"Happiness suits you, Will." She stated, soberly. "I imagined you with someone like Hannibal, but I never pictured you happy there."

"I'm surprised you could picture me with anyone; I never could."

She made a humming sound to acknowledge Will's honesty as she carefully dug into the glove-box to try and find something to clean her hands off with. He kept glancing over at her, taking his eyes off the road at intervals and looking over as it seemed that she had something else to say but was finding busywork to avoid it.

Will suspected that, even though he didn't know what she was going to say, it wouldn't be anything unfamiliar to him.

During the dinner Will had watched the other three at the table chat. He asked some questions and tried to contribute to the conversation, but he had actually enjoyed being among them, listening, rather than making awkward attempts to be socially engaging. His silence had drawn Steve's attention, and he'd looked worriedly over at Will for a while until he was satisfied that the other was content.

The profiler had appreciated it.

It had been obvious to him that something needed to change since he had come back. He would have been lying if he said that he wasn't a little hurt about how quickly everyone had accepted him as a monster, but knew it was partially his own fault. Will had been locked inside his mind so much that he'd never connected enough to anyone for them to trust him, but he wanted to now.

Previously, it had seemed that opening himself up to such vulnerability would be terrifying. He was already so encompassed by others that he was afraid that allowing someone else access would be devastating.

However, since that behaviour had led everyone to feel that he could do... that he could *be* something so monstrous and horrific, Will was starting to feel safer letting people got to know who he was. If he showed them the extent of his darkness, they wouldn't assume it was bottomless and he could forge a safety net from the connection he made with people.

And he wanted Steve to be at the centre of that.

Will just had to try and figure out how to finally articulate himself now that he knew what he wanted.

In an ideal world Will would have gone to Steve's place. It would have been a symbolic gesture to let the other man know that he was willing to step out of his life and embrace Steve's rather than expecting anything the other way around.

However, he didn't particularly want to walk into whatever army accommodations had been set up for their super soldier. While there had been no prominent hesitation on Steve's part in regards to being attracted to the same-sex, Will didn't know if it would be appropriate to make any sort of suggestions on a military base.

There was a park close by. It was not a dog park and so Will would never have suggested it if he wasn't trying to say something with its proximity, as he didn't like the notion of an area deliberately devoid of canines. There were several soldiers running around in a morning fitness routine, but Steve would have known they'd be there when he agreed to meet and so didn't feel self-conscious on the super-soldier's behalf.

Will watched the men and few women jog on the gravel path that ran near the bench where Will sat.

"Hi," Steve approached him from the corner of Will's gaze, he crossed the small grassy area before and taking a seat next to him, letting their knees touch as he angled himself. "Are you okay? You sounded urgent on the phone; I couldn't tell if you were worried or excited."

"Both, maybe. We didn't really get to talk much after the dinner, or during it, really. I just wanted to know if you'd gotten what you wanted out of it?"

Steve glanced over towards the path Will had been watching, but didn't seem to see anything.

"I'm not sure what I wanted out of it, or how I expected it to go, but I think it did help."

"Good," Will stated with earnest, "I think it helped me to maybe figure out what I want to do as well."

"Really?" Steve hooked an elbow over the back of the bench, his eyes seemed guardedly hopeful at Will's nod. "You seemed really confused about what you were feeling... Well, what you said was really confusing and so I assume you were confused."

Will huffed a self-deprecating laugh. "I know. Sorry. I guess I just needed someone who wasn't as close to the problem to look at it. Beverly made things sound... so much simpler than it felt, but she was right. You make me happy and I don't deserve to be miserable because of the work I do. I don't want my work to be my life, it shouldn't dictate me.

"What I'm trying to say, I think, is that *you* deserve better. You don't deserve to be a part of my life, and I can't expect you to when even *I* don't deserve that life." Will brought his gaze up from where it had settle on the grass to make sure Steve was still with him. "I want my work to be my work, and I don't want you to me more of a part of that than you already are, but everything else...

"I don't have a world outside work, but I'd like to. I'd like to have you. And your world... If that's something you might want too."

Steve seemed to allow Will his speech with a moderated expression on his face and a good measure of patience. It was difficult for Will to know how much he had accepted or even understood, as the words had come out in one large chunk, stuttering slightly at the end but delivered with more confidence than he could have hoped.

Although they were visible to the soldiers on the adjacent path, Will hooked his arm over the back of the bench, as Steve had, and let his fingers brush Steve's forearm behind the wooden panels. He knew his hand was shaking and clammy from nerves, but he also knew that Steve would appreciate the gesture.

The unfolded position made Will feel even more exposed; something that was not particularly desirable given the vulnerability of his admission.

Steve, who body language always seemed so open and honest to Will, even when being shy and withdrawn with his insecurity, seemed to pull in on himself without pulling away from Will's touch.

"I care about you a lot, Will, and you're right; you should be happy. With everything you do, you do deserve something wonderful. I'm..." Steve flushed, "I'm not exactly sure why you've decided I'm... worthy of your affections, but I'm glad that you have and I'm sorry if you've ever thought I didn't want to be a part of your... part of you."

Steve sighed and closed sky blue eyes. "We've both earned a life better than what we have. You *do* deserve to be happy, Will, but so do I... which is why I've already accepted the job in New York."

Will's body froze; the painful thudding of his heart being the only moving part of his body.

"I'm so sorry," Steve breathed. "You're very special, Will, and special to me, but I can't stay here. I don't feel like I can help people from the army base in the way this century needs; I think I need to be with the Avengers and maybe try to find my own life away from the memories of war and you... You need to find out who you are outside of work, and I don't think I would be of any help."

"Why not?"

The blond shifted to reclaim his arm and ran a hand through his hair before folding them in his lap, settling his gaze on the clasped digits.

Will followed suit by pulling his limbs in towards himself and retreated inside the more shame-filled recesses of himself, bracing himself for an answer he didn't know how to prepare for.

"I know that you are still feeling victimised," Steve started his slow explanation, "and I don't blame you for it. *Really*." He reached out slightly, but rethought before he got close enough to touch Will. "I think if I stay then I'll make it worse. I don't want to presume I know what's best for you," he prefaced his explanation, "but I don't think my presence is going to help you discover who you are beyond being a victim."

"I-Is this is because of my nightmares? You being the killer?"

"Yes," the answer came with more confidence than desired, "and I'm sorry, Will, but it just really worried me... I don't like people being bullied, and I don't like being used to bully people."

Will realized he must have been frowning when Steve gave a slight sigh and seemed to both straighten and deflate at the same time. "I guess it's my turn to be confusing. It's like you're bullying yourself into staying the victim. I know that doesn't make much sense, but I don't want to be too big a part of your life if it means I overtake your work and my presence keeps you feeling victimised."

"You don't want me to dream about you like that." Will summarised, feeling as if he was being punished for something he couldn't control. "I don't want to either, but how do you know it won't get worse if you go away?"

"I don't, but if staying makes it, or anything else, worse, then I don't want to lose my feelings for you by seeing..."

"No," Will did his best to swallow, "No... I understand. It's... I understand."

"Wil-"

"It's fine."

"No it's not. I wish staying would be the best thing; I want to stay with you... I just can't. I don't feel like this is my place."

The brunet knew that Steve's last statement was the crux of the matter. The timeless soldier deserved to have a place for himself where he felt safe; somewhere he didn't feel used for his physical enhancements or good nature.

Part of him, the part of Will had been accepted as necessary for his work, his gifts, had been using Steve has a tool to keep himself in a weaker position. Even though he felt strong around Steve, safe and accepted for who he was, if not for what he did, part of him couldn't seem to accept that and had implemented him into a position he didn't deserve.

As much as Will wanted them to somehow exist in the same world, he had the suspicion that Steve was right and the only way they could accomplish equal existence was to be apart.

"I don't want you out of my life completely," he admitted.

"I don't either." Steve said quickly. "Don't think you can't contact me or visit, or ask for me to come here." he placed a hand over Will's, "I don't want you to be alone, Will."

"And if you need me..."

"I will. I promise." Steve smiled sadly, "But I would like it if you could do something else for me."

Feeling his hand twitch under Steve's, Will looked away as the warm presence remained steady against his skin. "Yes?"

"I don't want you to be alone," Steve repeated, although with a change in the undercurrent. "I can't tell you what to do, so the favour I would like for you to do is for you to *consider* talking to Doctor Lecter again."

"What? Why? I've already been seeing him. Jack made me."

"I'm not trying to make you, and I know you've been having sessions and let him hypnotise you, but Ithink you might feel less alone when I'm gone if you and the doctor were on the same page about things. If I can't be there to help you I'd like to know someone can, albeit in a different way. I know you feel like you can't trust him anymore, because he should have known about the brain infection, but I'd like you to try."

Will remained silent for a moment, his brain turning over a little too quickly for him to decipher any particular thought or feeling. He found himself succeeding to speak when he thought he wouldn't be able to.

"If you think you can find a place in New York then you should go. If my... trying to forgive Hannibal will make you more comfortable in doing that then I can... I will try."

He had felt his hand flinch under Steve's, but the heavier one remained strong.

"If you ever need me, if you ever want me, I'll be back as soon as I can, for as long as you need."

"You don't need to-"

"No. No, I don't *need* to, Will."

"Okay," He looked away, "Thank you."

"Will..."

The soft hand removed itself from its resting position and brushed against Will's jaw to guide his gaze up and into Steve's; a move which didn't meet with much resistance.

Steve's lips were warm, as always, and just as understanding and comforting as they always had been. They were tinted with sadness, but Will was sure his felt the same and as tentative and reaffirming as the contact was, he knew it was a good-bye.

"You don't have to be alone," Steve whispered when they parted, "You don't deserve to be alone."

"Do you feel as if you wanted the relationship more than he?"

"No... No, but I think, maybe I needed it more."

"Perhaps."

"Right... So does that mean you disagree or not?"

"I do not know enough about Captain Rogers's situation to create an informed opinion on that matter. However, I do believe that, although your association has ended, it shall continue to prove to be a fruitful experience for you."

"He's living in New York; I don't see how anything can continue."

"Not the relationship itself, Will, but you have grown and shall continue to acclimate to life beyond encephalitis."

"Amongst other things."

"Indeed, although I am certain all involved will regain your trust admirably."

"We'll see."

"Perhaps it was because of Captain Rodger's disassociation with that period which allowed you to trust him to the extent you did."

"Meaning I couldn't have trusted him otherwise?"

"Not at all; he seemed particularly wholesome. Merely that you were able to be someone else, someone unhindered by pervious relationship, and experiment with reinventing who you are beyond the accusations of mental instability. You may now leave that person behind and become yourself again, having used him to move on."

"Well, I definitely didn't feel like myself when I was with him, that's true. Not the me that I know, at least."

"Now you have the opportunity to regain yourself through rebuilding your work and friendships."

"It's not as if I have anything else to do with my life."

"Although I cannot say I approve of that sentiment, I cannot dispute it."

"Regardless, that's what you think I should do; throw myself into my work, again, try to trust people, again, and keep taking care of my dogs."

"Yes, Will. Without the encephalitis to either aid or hinder you, you may return to your usual life; helping the FBI, re-establishing your relationships as they were, and, indeed, taking care of your canine companions."

Associating Steve with a modern piece of technology seemed at odds with who the man was.

Not that Will's television was particularly modern; he had to buy some new digital box and install something on his roof in order to actually get broadcasts, yet it was only barely able to connect to his set.

Will had rearranged his living-room too. It seemed fitting as he'd already had his life upheaved and readjusted; that now he had to learn to let go of certain things, shift them around and refocus. Not everything in his life would be the same after being falsely incarcerated, just as it wouldn't be the same after having met, loved and let go of Steve.

Most of his furniture was pointed at the screen, rather than the semi-random positioning they had adopted before. There was still a small chair at the window, and another in a corner with a pile of papers and machinery parts, but the chance of seeing Steve meant he did most of his work with lighted images flashing across to him, the sound muted.

It had been several months since Steve had left and it seemed as though his dogs missed Peggy almost as much as Will missed the human.

The television was showing a news broadcast, a memorial for invasion of New York in a heart-warming piece about those who had helped rebuild parts of the city and extended a hand to those who required one or more.

There were mentions of the Avengers being present, Tony Stark being the main spokes-person at that time, giving a conceited interview that Will could see covered and bluffed how important the community effort was to him. There were also some distant shots of a man in a maroon shirt, although it was obvious that the person directing the camera wasn't sure how he was relevant to the celebrity.

No mention of Steve specifically, but, somehow, Will knew he was there.

It was comforting to know that his friend was doing something important in New York. It wasn't all work with The Avengers, Will knew that, but it helped people in a way Will never could. In a way that didn't require people, including himself, being hurt or victimised before he could provide some sort of aid.

He was securing life, without absorbing death like Will did with his work.

The profiler searched the background of the mundane interviews for any sign that Steve was there.

He felt slightly like a stalker, one of the thousands of fanatics who idolised one or more of The Avengers. He did have a personal connection to one of them, which at least made it feel less desperate, but it still seemed as if he were doing something he shouldn't.

Will knew it was in no small part because of Hannibal. Over the months their session had slowly become more open, with Will talking a lot more about Steve and how things had been after he'd been released. He hadn't heeded much of Hannibal's advice as it mostly concerned him letting go and moving on from the short lived companionship.

However, he wasn't ready to write off the experience as something to be solely in the past. He knew it was probably not something he should hold with much hope, but Will wasn't sure if the feeling of disillusionment came from Hannibal's desire for Will to not glamorise the experience.

Sometimes the time he had spent with Steve seemed as good as he remembered and believed it had been, but in others Will wondered whether he had indeed projected more meaning into what they had done together.

He didn't know whether he felt awkward and 'stalker-ish' with his feelings just because of Hannibal's influence, or whether he had reason to be.

The news report continued without much sign of Steve, and Will tried not to be too disappointed.

Will promised himself that he wouldn't watch the next Avengers related news report, but knew he was a liar.

He closed his eyes and rubbed at the bridge of his nose from beneath his glasses for a moment, feeling the ache of the artificial light behind them. It was only for a second, but he had opted for one of the more important moments of the program, as he felt Holly's floppy ears brushing against his ankle as she nudged him with her nose.

The profiler lowered his hand and blinked as the screen came back into focus.

It wasn't Steve, but a familiar English Foxhound with her tail wagging as she snuffled around a few young boys; who were kicking a ball around while one of their parents talked to a reporter.

Will sunk back into the couch and accepted a well-earned smile.

He didn't know if he would see Steve again, whether they would both move onto lives where they grew without the other, but he wasn't ready to give up on what he'd felt. He now knew he could have a life that felt fuller and spilled beyond the darkness that he had once readily embraced, for fear of disappointing Jack, Hannibal, and the families of the victims.

Knowing that there was an alternative was a great comfort.

And knowing Steve was out there, doing good and just... being *Steve*, was enough to keep that comfort close.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, it's been a needlessly long wait, but I hope you've enjoyed Dog Days.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!